

# PREMCHAND



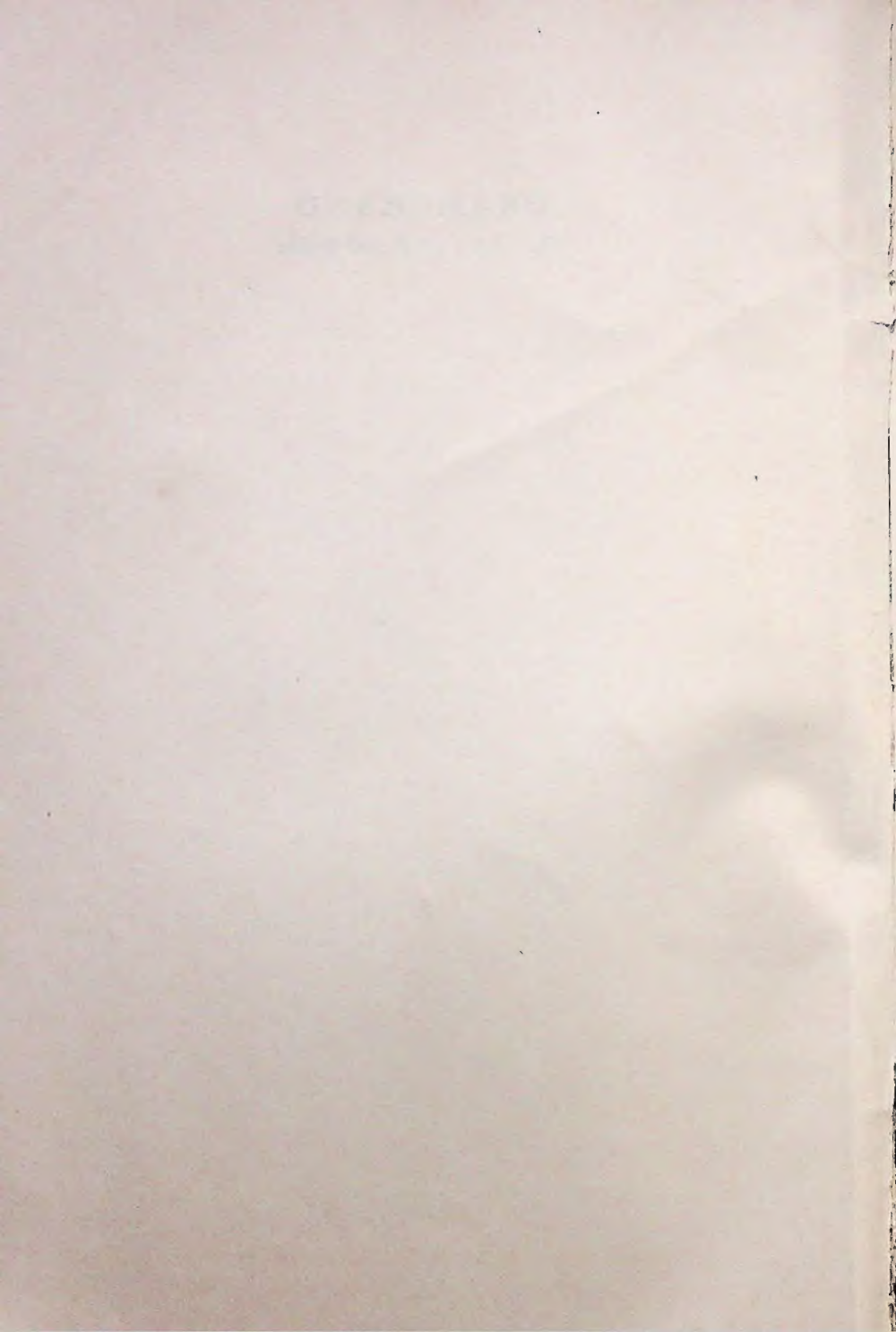








**PREMCHAND**  
**The Voice of Rural India**



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## **The Voice of Rural India**

**PRATIBHA NATH**



**राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्**  
**National Council of Educational Research and Training**



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## Foreword

Premchand occupies a very important place in the history of Indian literature. He was one of the first Indian writers to present a realistic portrayal of India's rural life and to establish a direct relationship between the life of the Indian people and his writings which mark the beginning of a new era in Indian thinking. Premchand also played an important role in the struggle for India's freedom through his writings and other activities.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has been bringing out different series of supplementary books for young readers with a view to introducing them to developments in science and other fields, to various aspects of India's cultural, literary and artistic heritage, and to the life and work of eminent scholars, scientists, national leaders, religious and social reformers and writers. The Council has already brought out supplementary books on Mirza Ghalib, Amir Khusro, Iqbal, Subramania Bharati, Shri Aurobindo, etc. The Council, therefore, felt that it was only fitting that a book on Premchand be brought out to commemorate the birth centenary of the great Indian writer. This would be the Council's homage to the memory of an illustrious son of India whose writings have inspired many of our people.

The NCERT is grateful to Smt. Pratibha Nath for preparing the present volume. The book contains a brief biographical sketch of Premchand by Smt. Nath, and her translation into English of some of the representative short stories of the writer, of an extract from Premchand's great novel *Godan*, of an extract from his Presidential Address to the first conference of the All India Progressive Writers' Association, and one of Premchand's letters translated by himself. The Council is indebted to Shri Sripat Rai for permission to use these materials. The Council is also grateful to Professor Namwar Singh of Jawaharlal Nehru University and to Professor Qumar Rais of Delhi University for their help and guidance as consultants at various stages in the preparation of this volume as well as the other two volumes in Urdu and Hindi. I am also thankful to Km. S.K. Ram, Shri N.K. Singh, Shri Arjun Dev and Shri Mujtaba Hussain of the NCERT for their work in connection with the preparation of these books on Premchand.

It is hoped that this volume as well as the other two volumes in Urdu and Hindi commemorating the birth centenary of a great writer of our country would be appreciated.

SHIB K. MITRA

*Director*

New Delhi  
*September 1981*

National Council of Educational  
Research and Training

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## Spotlight on Premchand

THE fame of Premchand has long since crossed all barriers, both linguistic and geographical. Premchand wrote in Hindi and Urdu, but in his very lifetime he was translated into several other Indian languages, including Marathi, Tamil and Telugu. He held the mirror to village life in what is now Uttar Pradesh. But such was his breadth of vision and universality of appeal that he has come to be considered the voice of rural India as a whole. In fact, he is as popular in the western and southern parts of the country as he is in the north, where he spent his entire life.

Premchand's works are not confined to India, either. They are very popular in Pakistan. They have also reached the Soviet Union and other socialist countries where they are widely read and admired. Premchand ranks among the great Indian men of letters of the twentieth century, the others being Tagore, Iqbal, and Subramania Bharati.

Who was Premchand? And how did his talent come to bloom ?

### The Boy and the Man

Premchand was born Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, the son of a postal clerk named Munshi Ajayab Lal. He came into this world on 31 July 1880 in a village called Lamhi, near Benares.

Munshi Ajayab Lal was a poor man. He never gave his son much money to spend because he never had much. As a boy, Premchand was always longing for things beyond his reach. In particular, the village sweet-shop held an abiding fascination for him. In his story 'Chori', he describes an occasion when his cousin stole a rupee and the two feasted on forbidden delights, followed by terrible punishment at the end of it all. Premchand never forgot those days. Again and again his stories examine the development of character in a family of meagre means. Some of his stories also revolve

around a postman's life. '*Kazaki*' is one example, where the hero is a *dak* runner who worked under his father.

As if material want was not enough of a trial, Premchand's mother fell ill and passed away when the boy was less than seven years of age. The loss pierced his heart. To add to his grief, his father married again and brought home a wife who was harsh and domineering. Premchand did not receive any comfort or attention from his father, either. Poverty, harshness and neglect made his boyhood miserable. But he never harboured a grudge against his family. Instead, he looked for compensations beyond the four walls of his house and found them in the lap of nature. Shady trees delighted him, as did fields rippling with golden wheat and the feel of soft, wet earth under naked feet.

Tragedy stalked Premchand's life. When he was still a student his father got him married. The following year, and even before Premchand had finished his schooling, his father died. Premchand was hard hit. In his own words: "I was in class nine then. A wife, a step-mother, her two children—and not a paisa at home. The savings had dwindled in getting father treated. I had originally planned to do my M. A. and become a lawyer...My hopes were all dashed."

Thus faced with disaster, Premchand compromised on his dreams and got down to earning for the family. For a while he was a tutor on five rupees a month; later he became an assistant teacher on eighteen rupees a month. Whatever his earnings, he kept a bare minimum for himself and gave the rest to his step-mother, although her nagging and harshness still continued unabated. Premchand had absolutely no reason to love her, yet he supported her right through. How many could have done it?

Premchand's first wife went away because she could not pull on with his step-mother. Some time later Premchand married again. His second wife, Shivrani Devi, was a widow—a patient, quiet woman with a fund of commonsense. Through all the ups and downs of life she was a prop for her husband. He praises her in glowing terms: "All that I have, I owe to my wife. I can never forget her sacrifices. I can only praise her patience."

It was a happy marriage, with a rare comradeship slowly developing between the two. Premchand shared all his thoughts and problems with his wife. And she, in turn, made an intelligent contribution to every discussion. Premchand had three children, a



daughter Kamala, and two sons Sripat Rai and Amrit Rai. Both his sons are writers.

Premchand speaks with intense feeling about 'home' because he was deprived of his home so early in life. He says, "A home is love's playground. Love was given this boon after a severe penance." The home figures repeatedly in his works, along with love for one's mother. Another motif that comes up again and again is love for children. The truth is, Premchand was himself very fond of children. In spite of his preoccupation with writing and a very tight time-schedule, he found the leisure to play with and teach his children. He looked after them when they were ill, sometimes carrying a child around for hours, trying to soothe him. He rarely scolded his children and never forced them to study.

At home Premchand helped his wife with the household chores. Domestic servants were treated as members of the family. Once a servant decamped with some cash and jewellery, but Premchand would not lodge a report with the police. His only comment was, "He must have needed it."

Premchand was an extremely hard-working man. In addition to his other work, he put in several hours of reading and writing everyday, even when he was ill. Premchand never kept good health. He always suffered from stomach trouble, which was a pity because he loved good food. His sister-in-law says that he was particularly fond of peas. When he walked through the countryside, he could not resist green peas growing in the fields. And his favourite dish was *ghugni*\* made from peas.

Towards the end Premchand developed a liver complaint. His wife nursed him with great devotion but the disease proved incurable. His condition deteriorated steadily and he passed away on 8 October 1936.

### Learning and Earning

There were not many schools in Indian villages at the close of the nineteenth century and very few of the type that we have now. Education was imparted through a *madrassa*, the traditional method since Moghul times. The teachers were known as *maulvis*. Urdu and Persian were the media of instruction. Premchand's

\*A savoury dish

school days are described as follows in '*Chori*'.

"My brother Haldhar and I went daily to the *maulvi* in the nearby village. I was eight then... We breakfasted on left-over *chapatis*, grabbed a handful of *chana* for the afternoon and set out. The day belonged to us. Maulvi Sahib kept no register, so there was no fine to pay if we were late. If we stayed away, nobody cared. We took our time reaching school. There were the impressive policemen to watch, parading in front of the *thana* and a *bhahuwalla* or *bandarwalla* to run after. There was the railway station, with black and blue monsters puffing up and down. I knew more about their comings and goings than even the time-table..."

There was a strong streak of the truant in Premchand's make-up. In '*Captain Sahib*' the hero Jagat is a kindred spirit. Says Premchand, "For Jagat going to school was like gulping down castor oil or quinine. He preferred to scoot off to guava groves. The keeper of the grove screamed abuse at him but that, to Jagat, was part of the fun."

Premchand cared little for Maulvi Sahib and less for the *madrasa* and his books. It is possible that this reaction was due to the mugging that was expected of students in those days. In '*Bade Bhai Sahib*' Premchand refers to the then current educational system with a degree of frustration that was perhaps justifiable. Later, when his father was transferred to Gorakhpur, Premchand was admitted to a regular school and he took a lot more interest in his studies.

At about the same time, Premchand was drawn to the world of fiction. He would spend his evenings at a friend's house where a few boys gathered regularly to read aloud from a book of romantic stories called *Tilism-e-Hoshruha*. It is difficult to imagine Premchand, the realist and master of the spare, unadorned style in prose, ever losing himself in the exotic stories of *Tilism-e-Hoshruha*. But perhaps he was driven by the completely lack-lustre life he led at home.

So potent was the spell cast by these stories that Premchand read all the Urdu fiction that he could lay hands on. It would have been impossible then, as now, to buy so many books. But a bookseller named Buddhilal allowed him to browse by the hour in his shop. In return Premchand sold small booklets from the shop to his class-fellows at school. He read hundreds of novels in those two or three years. Having exhausted Buddhilal's stock, he turned to an Urdu

translation of the *Puranas*. He was a voracious reader of fiction, but at school history and arithmetic continued to elude him. He has referred to this problem in the story '*Bade Bhai Sahib*'.

Two colleges refused Premchand admission, one because he could not afford the fees and the other because he was not good enough at maths to pass the admission test. To keep body and soul together he took up a job as tutor to two children. He lived in a tiny room atop a stable and subsisted on gruel, but he spent hours at the library. The purpose was to improve his maths and thereby gain admission to college. But he also read a lot of novels.

Those were terrible times for Premchand. Once, for two days, he lived on his last two paisas and then there was literally nothing left. In desperation he decided to sell a book on arithmetic which he had hoped to read some day. At the bookshop he met the headmaster of a local school who needed an assistant teacher. Premchand was selected for the job and served as a teacher till 1920.

All his life Premchand was dogged by great financial stress. But his spirit triumphed over it. "I had a relish for life," says a character in one of his stories, but it could well apply to him. "I was intoxicated with just being alive. I had courage. I exuded ambition." Premchand's life was a vindication of an ultimate truth as he himself has put it : "The greater the calamity the tougher the fibre. It's tragedy that makes a man."

### Premchand the Nationalist

There can be no doubt about the fact that Premchand was a born writer. But several external factors worked to bring his talent to the fore. Want and hardship and the inability to obtain a degree—all these sharpened the edge of ambition. He longed to do something worthwhile. Since stories fascinated him, what could be more natural than to try his hand at story-writing? His first novel appeared in 1901, his first short story in 1907. Thereafter they came in an endless stream. He was as prolific as he was deep.

Premchand was fired with nationalistic zeal. He could not tolerate the authority of the British. It is said that he had two encounters with British officers. To quote his son Amrit Rai, "One was with the District Magistrate, over a cow. The cow belonged to Premchand and had strayed into the District Magistrate's gar-



den. The District Magistrate was furious and said he would shoot the cow. When Premchand heard this he rushed to the spot. He was gentle to begin with, perhaps a little apologetic too, but nothing seemed to assuage the Magistrate's temper, whereupon Premchand also flew into a rage and dared the officer if he had the guts to shoot the cow.

"The other encounter was with someone high up in the Education Department itself. He often passed Premchand's quarters and saw Premchand sitting out in the verandah. The Sahib's imperial snobbery made him expect that Premchand would come out and *salaam* him each time.

"What nonsense! After school hours I am my own master," Premchand said, and stood his ground."

Apart from such incidents Premchand's nationalism found expression in his writings. He published a book of stories entitled *Soz-e-Watan*. There are five stories in *Soz-e-Watan*, all glorifying patriotism. The British did not like the book at all because they knew very well the power of the written word. The book was banned forthwith and a special bonfire made of all existing copies. Never before had an Indian writer's books been burnt publicly. Premchand was compelled to stand and witness the bonfire. He was also forbidden to publish any more of his writings. Since he could not comply with this order, he changed his pen-name from Nawab Rai to Premchand. *Soz-e-Watan* drove him to take a more active part in politics.

At about the same time Premchand began writing in Hindi instead of Urdu. His first significant novel was *Seva Sadan* and it set him firmly on the road. It was so highly praised that he started *Prem-ashram*, dealing with the condition of Indian peasantry after the First World War.

But writing was not enough. Premchand was a man of action. He wished to join in the struggle for independence and the time came when he first came into contact with Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji had taken over the leadership of the Congress and was now touring the country, preparing people for the coming struggle. Everywhere he asked Government servants to give up their jobs. Premchand writes in his autobiographical notes:

"The year is 1920. The non-violent movement is on the march. The Jallianwalla Bagh atrocity is behind us. Gandhiji paid a visit to Gorakhpur; a rostrum was erected in Gajimian Maidan. More

than two lakhs turned up, from village, city, town, hamlet, everywhere. I was stirred; Gandhiji was a remarkable tonic. Two or three days after his speech, I resigned from the job I had been holding for the last twenty years."

The truth is, Premchand had already been toying with the idea of giving up his job. He did not wish to serve under the British. He disliked red-tape and a bureaucratic set-up as much as he disliked the idea of flattering his superiors in office.

All the same, it was not an easy decision. Apart from the wrench of parting from his students and a settled way of life, there was the question of money. But with support from his wife, Premchand took the plunge. The resignation meant that he would have no connection with the British any more. It would give him a lot more freedom as a writer.

### The Writer Emerges

The period after the resignation is marked by a strange contrast. On the one hand, there was an uncertainty of employment, at times even a dire want of money. On the other hand, Premchand began to write with more and more assurance and his writings won acclaim everywhere.

Premchand tried several methods of earning money, among them opening a Khadi centre, working as editor of a Hindi magazine *Maryada*, and doing a stint at teaching. Nothing worked. By 1923 he had tired of them all and decided to settle down in his village home, with a printing press and publishing house at Benares. Apart from his desire to awaken and inspire people through his writings, Premchand craved popularity. He wished to reach as large and varied a reading public as possible and this could only be done through a press of his own.

The press and publishing house was duly launched but it started with a great disadvantage. Premchand had neither enough capital nor a head for business. Some friends who had joined the venture initially backed out when it ran into losses. Premchand had to fight alone. Apart from financial problems, the press involved a lot of hard work. Premchand was in indifferent health but he worked night and day to keep things going. When his wife protested he said gently, "What can I do, Rani? My life is a set routine.

I don't have a scrap of time to myself. . ."

The press that thus claimed his soul and sapped his strength also brought to light some of his best works—the novels *Kaya-Kalpa*, *Gaban*, *Karma-Bhumi* and *Godan* and two collections of short stories, *Mansarovar* and *Prem Dvadhshi*.

By now Premchand was famous and whatever he wrote was published promptly by Hindi journals. Though his books were published with equal promptness, they did not sell fast enough and money took a long time to trickle in.

Premchand had yet another problem on his hands. He had started two weeklies, *Hans* and *Jagran*. But neither weekly paid its way. In fact whatever money Premchand earned from other sources was pumped into the weeklies and they continued to be a drain on him till the very end. What kept Premchand's head above water was hack-writing—articles, essays and translations that were of a routine nature and sold readily. He echoes the sentiments of writers in general when he says, "Working for literature is nothing but a penance."

The year 1931 saw the publication of yet another collection of patriotic stories entitled *Samar Yatra*. Herein Premchand set out to portray and advance the Civil Disobedience movement. A ban was imposed on it as soon as it came out.

The title story of *Samar Yatra* is memorable because here Premchand points an accusing finger at the peasant who dumbly allows others to exploit him. Says the hero to a gathering of *kisans*, "You're being fleeced, that's all, and you want to be fleeced, yes, you and you and you! You don't say a word and you don't lift a finger."

Those were the days of the Civil Disobedience movement. "Salt laws were defied, English cloth boycotted and burnt and shops selling foreign liquor picketed." Premchand and Shivrani Devi both wished to court arrest. But there were the children to consider. In the end Shivrani Devi went to jail while Premchand stayed at home to look after the children. Perhaps his poor health influenced their decision.

In 1934 Premchand got an assignment in Bombay. He was engaged by a producer to write scripts for films. Premchand accepted the offer, hoping to give wide publicity to his ideas through the medium of films. But he found the work distasteful from the very start because he had to write to suit the requirements of the directors. Deeply disappointed, he came back to Benares once again.



Meanwhile the nationalist movement had been gathering momentum all over the country. In April 1936, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was elected President of the Indian National Congress. Under his leadership, socialistic trends became obvious within the movement. Several Indian writers of the time were already inclined towards socialism, notably Premchand. These writers earnestly wished to see inequalities removed from the social and the economic spheres. It was in these circumstances that the Progressive Writers' Association was born.

Premchand was elected President of the Progressive Writers' Association which held its first all-India meeting in Lucknow in October 1936. His presidential address was a landmark. He said, "We must see to it that our literature possesses these fundamental qualities : dignified thought, the breath of freedom, beauty and clarity of style and a clear reflection of life's calm and bustle, the heart of truth. It must give us a goal, it must make us alive, it must make us think."

Premchand's short stories number some three hundred. A few of the famous ones are 'Kafan', 'Do Bailon Ki Katha', 'Thakur Ka Kuan', 'Panch Parmeshwar', 'Namak Ka Daroga', and 'Chori'. Some others, not so famous, but very meaningful are, 'Nadaan Dost', 'Sajjanta Ka Dand', 'Hinsa: Parmo Dharma', 'Muft Ka Yash' and 'Kazaki.'

Premchand has written about a dozen novels. Some of the best known among these are *Godan*, *Rang Bhumi*, *Nirmala* and *Gaban*.

Premchand has also written a number of historical romances, for example, *Raja Hardaul*, *Rani Sarandha* and *Ruthi Rani*. These do not seek to revive the ancient Rajput tradition. They only wish to make the reader aware of Rajput customs, bravery and absolute devotion to a cause. The times were in need of nationalism. Perhaps Premchand sought to fan the spirit of nationalism by reviving a glorious chapter of our history.

### Premchand the Journalist

As a journalist Premchand deserves special mention. There was a time when he contributed columns to established papers and magazines. But this had to stop because his fearlessness clashed with the conservatism of the editors. Finally Premchand resolved to start his own forum and launched *Hans* and *Jagran*.

The former was a literary magazine, meant to familiarise people with the literature of different Indian languages. It contained, among other things, valuable comments from Premchand on literature, particularly progressive literature. *Jagran* was a political paper, launched chiefly to awaken the nationalist spirit. Through *Jagran* Premchand freely and honestly expressed his political opinions and continued to do so in spite of the punitive fine imposed on the magazine from time to time.

Premchand had occasion to work as editor of several Hindi magazines: *Zamana*, *Azad*, *Maryada* and *Madhuri*. As editor he had lofty ideas. He says, "The editor of a paper is a servant of society . . . His thought carries the stamp of his public's thinking. His critical faculties are sharpened by daily contact with different views and persons."

Premchand was a gifted editor. He felt the pulse of his readers without losing his own sense of proportion. In his capacity as editor, Premchand gave endless encouragement and guidance to aspiring writers. He read their works very carefully and offered valuable suggestions. One of the people he helped is the well-known writer of today, Upendranath 'Ashk'.

### From Those Who Knew Him

Those who knew Premchand remember him as a man of medium height and slight build, serene and well-mannered. And they also remember him as a man with an infectious laugh. Sri Banarsidas Chaturvedi, a well-known journalist, said of Premchand after their first meeting, "What an excellent person to meet, talk to and stay with! He seemed able to laugh for practically no reason at all, and was always ready to look at the funny side of things."

Testimony of this kind speaks very highly of Premchand. Judging by the course of his life he could not possibly have been a happy man. But if he could still find it in his heart to laugh and spread good cheer, he must have been a deeply philosophical man who had come to terms with life and risen above the want and hardship that were his lot from start to finish.

From Srimati Mahadevi Verma comes a revealing anecdote about Premchand. Once he went to meet her at the Mahila Vidyapeeth at Allahabad. The attendant at the door, a woman,

did not know him. She informed him that Shrimati Verma was busy. Premchand laughed and said, "But *you* aren't busy, are you? Come, sit with me and tell me about yourself."

It was the end of May and unbearably hot. Premchand and the woman sat down under a shady *neem* tree and were lost to the world. Soon the *mali*, *chowkidar* and *chaprasi* joined them. Much later when Shrimati Verma came looking for the woman, she saw beneath the *neem* tree all the elements of a gathering at a village *chaupal*.

She was deeply dismayed to think of the inconvenience caused to Premchand, but his response was typical. He said, "Out here I have collected a lot of material for my stories. Would I have got it otherwise? You are a poetess. What do *you* know of stories? It's only a woman like her who can tell a story."

This anecdote is a key to Premchand the man. It lays bare his utter simplicity and humility. Although a celebrity at that time, he was not at all offended at being turned away from the door. Nor did he consider it below his dignity to talk to common people.

### The Writer Who Was a Landmark

The above anecdote further reveals the core of Premchand's inspiration as a writer: it was none other than life itself. He dipped repeatedly into what he had seen of life around him. This furnished him with plots, characters and conflict.

Thus Premchand's stories have a very marked autobiographical element. '*Chori*', '*Kazaki*', '*Bade Bhai Sahib*', and many more hinge on incidents he lived through and people he met.

Most of his stories have a rural background. Premchand knew the life of the peasant at first hand. He was born and brought up in a village and later, during the course of his tenure as Education Inspector, he toured remote areas.

What is more, Premchand had made a careful study of Tolstoy and other Russian writers, especially Maxim Gorky. He had been deeply influenced by the October Revolution and longed to change the conditions prevailing in India. Of course he was an ardent nationalist who wielded his pen as a forceful weapon against foreign rule. But he was also opposed to a capitalist civilization.

He believed that political freedom would be meaningless unless accompanied by a change in the social and economic structure as well. There was exploitation at every level and nothing could be gained by substituting one kind of exploitation for another. Rupmani says in *'Qurbani'*—"I don't give *that*" (snapping her fingers) "for freedom, if freedom means putting Govind in place of John."

Premchand's novels and stories are a voice of protest against all forms of exploitation and social injustice. He has attacked several evils of his times with a boldness befitting a social reformer. Linked with his vision of a free India was his ardent faith in communal harmony. Characters drawn from the different Indian communities flit through his stories. He shows them living happily together. He depicts a close friendship between them. And where fanaticism raises its ugly head, Premchand is quick to denounce it, as in the story *'Hinsa : Parmo Dharma.'*

Premchand is known to have treated the women in his life with great respect. He believed in the emancipation of women and in giving them dignity and authority. The women in his stories emerge as fully developed individuals in their own right and not as mere shadowy counterparts of their men. Bhanu Kunwari in *'Ishwariye Nyay'* is one such example.

Premchand was every inch a pioneer in the sense that he was among the first Indian writers to write utterly realistic, true-to-life stories about the Indian peasant. He made a clean break from the romantic tradition in literature on which he had been brought up. His realism was a natural development of his rural background. He knew just where it hurt. He knew all about toil and meagre returns and exploitation by village *purohits* and government officials. He identified himself completely with the Indian peasant, lending him his voice and dedicating to him all his skill as a writer.

And what skill! Premchand was a consummate artist. He began by writing in Urdu and switched over to Hindi later on. In the beginning his style was rich and heavy, fashioned after the Urdu romances he had read so avidly in his youth. But later he earned a name for simple and direct expression. The closer he got to real life, the more he discarded frills and trimmings. His language gained in purity and accuracy as he began to deal with the lives of village folk. And it rose to rare heights in his last complete novel, *Godan*.



Premchand was a pastmaster at the art of story-telling. The hundreds of plots, big and small, that crowd his canvas are ample proof of his creative imagination. So are his characters. They are individuals, true to life and convincing. Many of them are unforgettable, but the one that emerges as an absolute masterpiece is Surdas in *Rang Bhumi*.

The dialogues that flowed from Premchand's pen are smooth and effortless, totally devoid of artifice. We can get a measure of his inventiveness when we consider that he has dealt successfully with a most impressive range of situations, from the starkest tragedy (as in *Kafan*) to top class comedy (as in parts of *Godan*). He has given a sensitive portrayal of village life in its entirety—its peaceful moments, its humour, and its want and pain.

### The Legacy of Premchand

Premchand's writings are an utterly sincere, heartfelt expression of humanitarian principles. For this reason they will never be outdated. Their appeal is for ever. They are the legacy that Premchand has left for generations to come.

He has left a message for all aspiring writers by placing before them a glowing example of what one can achieve through hard work and determination. He has cautioned them against getting caught up in the intricacies of language since language is a means and not a goal. The aim of literature is to fuse noble ideas with an appropriate style.

Premchand says that stories should have depth and truth rather than surface beauty. He insists that, "Man is won over by art which bears the stamp of his own soul. And literature must reflect clearly and honestly the face of real life."



## My Elder Brother

*(Bade Bhai Sahib)*

**M**Y brother, though five years my senior in age, was only three classes ahead. He started going to school at the same age as I, but in a vital matter like education, he did not wish to be hasty. He wanted to lay a solid foundation so that later he could build a magnificent palace over it. He did one year's work in two. Sometimes it took him even three years. If the foundations were weak, how would the house be sturdy?

I was younger than him. He was fourteen and I was nine. He had every right, by virtue of his birth, to watch over me and rebuke me. As far as I was concerned, courtesy demanded that I look upon his orders as law.

He was very studious by nature and always sat with a book before him. Perhaps to give a little rest to his brain he doodled. He sometimes drew pictures of birds, dogs and cats on his notebooks or along the margin of his books. Sometimes he wrote a single name or word or sentence several times over. Sometimes he copied

down a couplet in beautiful hand, again and again. He often wrote things that had neither meaning nor logic. For example, once I saw on his notebook the following text—special, Amina, between brothers, in truth, two brothers, Radhey Shyam, Mr Radhey Shyam, within an hour . . . There followed the face of a man. I tried hard to find an answer to this riddle, but failed, and did not have the courage to ask him. He was in class nine and I in class five. It was presumptuous of me to expect to understand his composition.

I was not at all interested in studies. It was a monumental task to sit with my books even for an hour. At the first opportunity, I would run out of the hostel and on to the field. Sometimes I played with pebbles, at other times I made paper butterflies and flew them. If I ran into a friend, my happiness knew no bounds. Sometimes we would scramble up the compound wall and jump down, sometimes we would swing on the gate and by pushing it back and forth derive the pleasure of a joy-ride in a car. But when I came back and saw my brother's severe countenance, I would be scared to death. His first question would invariably be, "Where were you?" Always the same question, always asked in the same tone. And my only reply to it would be silence. I don't know why I couldn't utter a simple thing like 'I was out playing'. My silence appeared to be a confession of guilt and my brother had no choice but to scold me, "If this is how you go about reading English, you will be at it all your life and not learn a single word. Learning English is no joke. Not many people can do it, or else every Tom, Dick and Harry would become a scholar of English. We have to pore over books night and day and undergo terrible strain. And what do we learn but a smattering? Even great scholars can't write chaste English, much less speak it. And I must say you are a fool not to take a leaf out of my book. You see perfectly well how hard I work. If you don't see it, you must be blind, and stupid too! So many fairs and shows are held here. Have you ever seen me attend any? Cricket and hockey matches are played every day, but I don't go anywhere near them. I'm studying all the time. Even then I spend two or three years in each class. How then can *you* hope to pass when you spend all your time fooling around? I take two or three years, you will spend your entire life rotting in the same class. If you are bent upon wasting your life in this manner, better go home and enjoy yourself playing *gulli-danda*. Why waste your father's hard-earned money?"

On being thus rebuked I always burst into tears. What could I say in reply? I *was* guilty but who can stand reproof? He would make such caustic remarks that I would be heart-broken and lose all confidence in myself. I did not feel equal to a strenuous activity like studying and would begin to think despondently. "Why don't I go home? Why should I ruin my life by attempting something that is beyond my capacity?" I was content to remain a fool but could not possibly work so hard. Such thoughts would make me dizzy, but after an hour or two the clouds would lift and I would resolve to put my heart and soul into my studies. A time-table was made in a flash. Without advance planning and a proper scheme, how could I start? The time-table did not allow for any respite in the shape of games. It ran, 'Get up early morning. After a wash and breakfast, sit down to study at six. From six to eight—English. Eight to nine—Arithmetic. Nine to nine-thirty—History, followed by lunch and school. After return from school at three-thirty—half an hour's rest. From four to five—Geography, five to six—Grammar, followed by a half-hour stroll in front of the hostel. From six-thirty to seven—English composition. After dinner, from eight to nine—translation, nine to ten—Hindi. Ten to eleven—other subjects, thereafter sleep.'

But it is one thing to make a time-table and quite another to follow it. From the very first day I would begin to transgress it. So many things drew me quite unawares and irresistibly—the peaceful green of the fields, gentle puffs of breeze, the bounce of a game of football, the swiftness and agility of volleyball and the dodges of *kabaddi*. Once there I forgot everything else. I forgot that killer time-table and those books that all but destroyed the eyesight. I remembered neither and once again Bhai Sahib got a chance to preach to me. I ran from his very shadow and tried my best to avoid him, entering a room softly so that he would not become aware of my presence. The moment he raised his eyes and saw me, I nearly died of fright. I always felt as if there was a naked sword poised over my head. Yet, in spite of all the scolding, I could not give up games and sports just as, caught between death and disaster, man is still bound by attachment and desire.



## 2

The annual examination was held. Bhai Sahib failed; I not only passed but stood first in my class. Now the gap between us was reduced to two years. I felt like taking Bhai Sahib to task and asking him, "Where did your penance get you? Look at me. I played around happily and still managed to stand first in my class." But he was so depressed and unhappy that my heart went out to him and the very idea of rubbing things in appeared contemptible. I became a little proud and self-assured. Bhai Sahib no longer had the old influence over me. I freely joined in sports and games. If he preached to me again, I would bluntly say, "What have you achieved by killing yourself? Look at me. I kept playing and still stood first." Although I did not have the guts to give voice to this boast, it was clear from my conduct that Bhai Sahib had lost his hold on me. Bhai Sahib understood this. He had a very robust common-sense and one morning when I came back after a session of *gulli-danda* he set upon me, armed with a sword, as it were, "I can see that you have grown conceited because you passed and stood first in class. But the pride of even the greatest has been humbled. What is your standing? You must have read in history what happened to Ravana. What lesson have you learnt from his character? Or did you read through it casually? Simply passing an examination is nothing, the main thing is the development of your brains. You must understand the significance of what you read. Ravana was the lord of the earth. An empire such as his called is '*chakravarty*'. These days the British have a vast empire. But we cannot call it *chakravarty*. Several nations of the world refuse to acknowledge the supremacy of the British. They are absolutely independent. But Ravana was a *chakravarty raja*. All the kings of the world paid him tribute. The greatest among the gods were like his slaves. The gods of fire and water were also his servants. But what was his end? His pride wiped out both him and his race, there was not a soul left. Whatever evil deeds a man may do, let him not indulge in pride. Let him not put on airs. If he is proud, he loses in both the material and the spiritual worlds. You must also have read what happened to Satan. He was proud that there was no greater and truer devotee of God than himself. In the end he was cast out from heaven into hell. Once the Emperor of Rome also gave way to pride. He

died begging for alms. If your head has turned on clearing just one class, then your progress is indeed assured! You can take it from me that you have not succeeded through hard work, but through sheer luck. This kind of thing can happen only once, not again and again. Sometimes when playing *gulli-danda* one makes a hit by chance but this does not make one a successful player. A successful player is one whose shots never miss their mark. Don't go by my failure. When you reach my class you will sweat and toil, battling with things like algebra and geometry and English history. It is not easy to remember the names of kings. There have been as many as eight Henrys. Do you think it is easy to remember in which Henry's reign a particular event took place? Write Henry VIII instead of Henry VII and you lose all marks! Not even a zero will you get, not even a zero! Have you ever thought of that? There have been dozens of Jameses, dozens of Williams, scores of Charleses. The brain reels, one feels giddy thinking of them. The unfortunate British could not even find names. They simply affixed Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth to a single name. Had they asked me I would have suggested a million names. As for geometry, God help us! Write ABC instead of ACB and all your marks are cut. There is no one to ask these heartless examiners what, after all, the difference is between ABC and ACB and why they slaughter candidates for such trivial reasons. How does it matter whether you eat *dal* and rice and *roti* or rice and *dal* and *roti*? But are these examiners concerned with anything beyond the book? They want the boys to learn every single letter by heart. And such cramming has been given the name of education. After all what is the use of reading things that have neither head nor tail? 'If you drop a perpendicular on this line, the base will be twice the perpendicular'.

"What, one may ask, is the use of this? How do I care whether it is twice or four times the size or remains a mere half? But if you want to pass an exam you must learn all this rubbish. You are told to write an essay on 'punctuality', not less than four pages in length. All you do is, open your notebook, pick up your pen and curse them. Who doesn't know that punctuality is a very good thing? It brings discipline into a man's life. Other people begin to have a regard for him and his business prospers. But how can one write four pages on a little thing like that? What, anyway, is the use of writing four pages on something that can be

said in a single sentence? I would call this folly. Overstressing a thing without sufficient reason is not economy but misuse of time. We want a man who says quickly what he has to say. But no. You are compelled to colour four pages, no matter how you do it. And mind you, foolscap pages at that. Isn't this a cruelty to students? The irony of the whole situation is that you are told to write briefly. Write a brief essay, not less than four pages! Fine! A brief essay means four pages. Otherwise we would have to write a hundred or two hundred pages. It's like running both fast and slow. Isn't that a contradiction? Even a child can understand a little thing like that but not these teachers. When you come to my class, sir, you will know just what is what. You have topped in this class so you are walking on air. Take my advice. I might fail a hundred-thousand times, still I am older than you and have more experience of the world than you have. Make a note of what I say or you'll be sorry."

It was nearly time for school otherwise God knows when this sermon would have ended. My food seemed tasteless to me. When I was being harangued on having passed, perhaps I would have been killed if I had failed. I was terrified by the fearful picture of studies in his class that Bhai Sahib had painted. It is a wonder that I did not leave school and run away home. But in spite of all these warnings I still remained uninterested in books. I never lost an opportunity to play games. I studied too, but very little, just enough to complete the day's task and to avoid being disgraced in class. The self-confidence that had taken root within me disappeared again, and once more I began to live the life of a thief.

## 3

Again the annual exams were held and as chance would have it, again I passed and Bhai Sahib failed. I did not work very hard but somehow managed to stand first in class. I was myself surprised. Bhai Sahib had put heart and soul into his work. He had swallowed every single word of the course, working till ten in the night, from four in the afternoon, and from six to nine-thirty before going to school. He looked completely drained with the effort but still he failed. I felt sorry for him. When the result was announced he burst into tears and I also began to cry. My joy

at my success was halved. Had I also failed Bhai Sahib would not have been so unhappy. But who can divert destiny?

Between Bhai Sahib and me there now remained a gap of only one class. An evil thought sprang up within me: if Bhai Sahib failed another year I would be his equal. On what basis then would he preach to me? But I forcibly thrust this uncharitable thought from my heart. 'After all, he scolds me for my own good. At this time I doubtless find it unpleasant but perhaps it is due to his sermons that I pass again and again and secure such good marks too.'

By now Bhai Sahib had softened to a great extent. Several times, even on finding an opportunity to scold me, he showed great patience. Perhaps now he had himself come to understand that he no longer had a right to scold me, or at best, to a very small extent. I became more and more self-willed and began to take advantage of his tolerance. I had the conviction that I would pass, whether I studied or not. Luck was on my side. Thus I stopped studying what little I used to for fear of Bhai Sahib. I had developed a new interest—flying kites—and now all my time was devoted to it. Even so, I respected my brother and flew kites in secret. Preparing the *manjha*, correcting the balance of the kite, planning for kite tournaments and allied problems were all solved in secrecy. I did not want Bhai Sahib to suspect that my respect and regard for him had gone down.

One evening, at some distance from the hostel, I was running recklessly to loot a drifting kite. My eyes were turned upwards to the sky and my heart lay with this traveller who came gliding slowly, rolling towards a fall, like a restless soul coming out of heaven to inhabit a new world. A whole army of children was surging towards it to welcome it, armed with sticks and bamboos. Nobody was aware of his surroundings. Everyone was, as it were, flying with that kite up in the sky, where everything is smooth and there are neither cars, nor trams or trains.

Suddenly I ran into Bhai Sahib who was perhaps returning from the market. Then and there he caught me by the hands and said angrily, "Aren't you ashamed, running after a worthless kite with these street urchins? You don't have any consideration for the fact that now you are no longer in a junior class. On the contrary, you are in class eight and only one class below me. After all, a man should have some regard for his position. There was a time



when people used to become *naib-tehsildars* after passing class eight. I know several *middlechis* who are first class magistrates or superintendants. So many who have passed class eight are our leaders and the editors of our newspapers. Great scholars work under them. And you, having come to the same class, are running after a kite with these street urchins! I am grieved by your lack of sense. Without a doubt, you are clever, but what use is cleverness if it destroys one's self-respect? You must be thinking to yourself 'I am only one class below Bhai Sahib and now he has no right to say anything to me'. But this is where you are mistaken. I am five years older than you and even if you come to my class today—(and if this is the attitude of examiners, then without a doubt, next year you will be my class-fellow and perhaps after a year you will be ahead of me)—the five years' difference between you and me cannot be erased by God himself, to say nothing of you. I am, and shall always remain, five years older than you. You cannot equal my experience of life and this world, even if you become an M.A. and D. Phil and D. Litt. Our mother has not passed a single class and even our father has, perhaps, not gone beyond class five or six. But they will always retain the right to guide and correct us, even if we acquire all the knowledge in the world. Not only because they have given us life but also because they have and will always continue to have more experience of the world than we do. What kind of government America has, or how many times Henry VIII married, or how many planets there are in the sky—these things they may not know. But there are thousands of things which they know better than you or I. God forbid, if I were to fall ill today, you would be at your wits' end. You would not be able to think of anything save sending a wire to Dada. But if Dada were in your place he would not send a wire to anyone, nor would he get nervous or panicky. First he would diagnose the illness himself and then proceed to treat it. If he were unsuccessful, he would call a doctor. But an illness is a big thing. The two of us do not even know how to stretch our monthly allowance to last a whole month. Whatever Dada sends, we finish by the twentieth or twenty-second and then become paupers. We have to cut out snacks and avoid meeting the *dhobi* and the barber. But living on half of what we are spending now, Dada has managed a large portion of his life with credit and honour. He has raised a family in which there are a total of nine

members. Look at our own Headmaster Sahib. Isn't he an M.A.? And not an M.A. from here, but an M.A. from Oxford. He gets a thousand rupees, but who is managing his household? His old mother. Headmaster Sahib's degree proved useless in this matter. Earlier he used to run the household himself but there was never enough money. He incurred debts. Ever since his mother has taken the management into her own hands, it is as if Lakshmi has come into the house. So, my dear brother, root out from your mind the notion that you have come close to me and are now independent. You will not be able to go astray while I am there to watch over you. If you don't obey me, I can make use of this too (indicating a slap). I know that my words are like poison to you."

I felt humbled at this new attitude of his. I honestly became aware of my smallness and a deep regard for Bhai Sahib took root within me. I said with tears in my eyes, "Certainly not! Whatever you are saying is absolutely true and you have a right to say it."

Bhai Sahib embraced me and said, "I am not forbidding you to fly kites. Even I long to do so but what can I do? If I go astray myself how can I safeguard you? This duty has also fallen to my lot."

As luck would have it, just at that moment a kite drifted above our heads. Its string was trailing and a horde of boys came running after it. Bhai Sahib was tall. He leapt and caught the string and raced towards the hostel. I ran after him.



## Kazaki

**K**AZAKI is one person who cannot be effaced from my childhood memories. Forty years have gone by but the image of Kazaki still dances before my eyes. Those days I lived with my father in a *tehsil* in Azamgarh. Kazaki was a Pasi by caste, very lively and cheerful and courageous. Every evening he brought the mail-bag, stayed the night and returned with the mail the following morning. In the evening he came again with the mail from the other side. All day long I waited for him. As soon as it struck four, I became utterly restless. I went and stood on the road. In a short while Kazaki would be seen, approaching at a run, jingling the bells of the spear on his shoulder. He was a dark-complexioned, tall and sturdy young man. His body was so finely moulded that even a skilful sculptor could not have found fault with it. A short and trim moustache adorned his shapely face. Seeing me, he quickened his pace, the bells rang louder and my heart beat faster with joy. Filled with ecstasy, I broke into a run and the next minute I was seated on Kazaki's shoulder, as on a throne. That

was the heaven of all my desires. Perhaps the denizens of heaven would not have experienced the wild joy that I found on the vast shoulders of Kazaki. The world grew insignificant in my eyes and when Kazaki began to run with me on his shoulder, it seemed that I was sitting astride a flying horse.

When Kazaki reached the post office, he would be soaked in perspiration but it was not in his nature to take rest. As soon as he had put down his bag, he would take us out to the fields, play with us, sing folk songs and sometimes tell us stories. He knew hundreds of stories about thieves and robbers, fights, ghosts and witches. On hearing these stories I would be lost in wonder and ecstasy. The thieves and dacoits in his stories were true heroes who plundered the rich to support the poor. I revered rather than despised them.

## 2

One evening Kazaki was late coming with the mail-bag. The sun had set and he was not to be seen. Feeling lost I stood on the road and stared hard into the distance but couldn't spot the familiar figure. I strained my ears but couldn't catch the delightful jingling sound. My hopes faded with the waning light of the sun. If I saw anyone coming from the same direction, I asked, "Is Kazaki coming?" But either people did not hear me or they simply shook their heads.

All of a sudden I heard a tinkle of bells. Normally in the dark I saw ghosts everywhere. Once darkness had fallen I had to abandon even the sweets on the shelf in Mother's room. But on hearing that sound I leapt towards it. Yes, it was Kazaki. As soon as I saw him, my restlessness turned to rage. I began to hit him, then went and stood apart in a huff.

Kazaki laughed and said, "If you hit me, I won't give you what I've brought."

I replied boldly, "Don't. I'm not taking it."

Kazaki : "If I show it, you'll run and pick it up in your arms."

I melted. "All right. Let me see."

Kazaki : "Come and climb on my shoulder. I must run. Today I'm very late and *Babuji* must be getting angry."

I was adamant and said, "First show it to me." I won. Had



Kazaki not been afraid of getting late and could have spared another minute, perhaps things would have shaped differently. He showed me something which he held to his breast with one hand. I saw a long muzzle and two shining eyes.

I ran and took it from Kazaki's arms. It was a baby deer.

Who can gauge the happiness that I felt at that moment? Since then I have passed tough exams, risen to good positions and earned the title of Rai Bahadur, but never again have I experienced such happiness. I ran home with the deer in my arms, enjoying the feel of its soft coat. I did not even remember that Kazaki had been late.

I asked Kazaki, "Where did you find him?"

Kazaki : "A short distance from here there is a little wood with lots of deer. I was very keen to find a baby deer that I could present to you. Today I saw this little one going along with the herd. I gave chase and they all ran away. The fawn also ran but I did not give up the chase. The other deer raced far ahead but this one lagged behind and I caught him. That is why I was delayed."

Chatting in this manner we reached the post office. *Babuji* did not see me. He did not see the baby deer either. Only Kazaki caught his eye. He said irritably, "Where were you all this time? You have turned up with the mail-bag at this hour! What shall I do with it? The *dak* is already gone. Tell me, where were you?"

Kazaki did not utter a word.

*Babuji* said, "Perhaps you don't wish to work any longer. Once a low-caste begins to eat his fill, he becomes lazy. Wait till you starve, then you will learn."

Kazaki stood silent.

*Babuji* became even more angry. He said, "Very well, put down the bag and go home. Swine, you have brought the *dak* at this hour! You will lose nothing. You will work as a labourer anywhere but I shall have to answer for it. Explanations will be called of me."

Kazaki replied tearfully, "Sir, I shall never be late again."

*Babuji* : "First answer me. Why were you late today?"

Kazaki had no reply to that. The surprising part of it is, even I became tongue-tied. *Babuji* was a hot-tempered man. He was very much overworked; that is why he flew into a rage over little things. I seldom ventured in his presence, nor did he ever pet me. He came home only twice a day, for an hour each time, to take his

meals. The rest of the day he was busy writing in his office. He had repeatedly requested his superiors for an assistant but this request had failed to produce any results. So much so that *Babuji* had to spend even his holidays in the office. Only Mother knew how to pacify him, but how could she come to the office ?

Poor Kazaki was dismissed on the spot, before my very eyes. His spear, turban and belt were taken away and he was ordered to leave the post office. How I wished at the moment that I had untold wealth so that I could give it all to Kazaki and show *Babuji* that Kazaki had come to no harm as a result of his dismissal. Kazaki was as proud of his belt as any hero may be proud of his sword. While he was removing the belt, his hands shook and tears streamed from his eyes. And the root cause of all this mischief was the delicate little creature that snuggled in my arms.

When Kazaki left I followed him. At the door of my house Kazaki said, "*Bhaiya*, you had better go home now. It is late. Dusk has fallen."

I stood there silent, trying with all my might to control the flood of tears. Kazaki said again, "*Bhaiya*, it isn't as if I shall go away somewhere. I shall come again and give you a joy-ride on my shoulder. *Babuji* has taken away my job, but won't he allow even this much? I shall never leave you, *Bhaiya*. Please go and tell your mother that Kazaki is leaving. May she forgive him his faults."

I ran into the house but instead of saying anything to my mother, I burst out crying. Mother rushed out of the kitchen and began to ask, "What's happened, son? Who has beaten you? Has *Babuji* scolded you? Just you wait. When he comes home, I shall question him. He's always beating my son. Don't cry, and don't you go near your father again."

With great difficulty I controlled my voice and said, "Kazaki..."

Mother thought Kazaki had hit me. She said, "Very well, let Kazaki come and I shall have him sacked on the spot. He, a mere runner, beating my son! I shall have his spear and turban taken away from him *today*."

I said hastily, "No... Kazaki did not hit me. *Babuji* has sacked him. His turban and spear have been taken away, also his belt!"

Mother : "Your *Babuji* has done wrong. The poor fellow is such a conscientious worker. Why on earth was he sacked?"

I replied, "Today he was late."

With these words I put down the baby deer. Within the house there was no fear of his running away. So far Mother had not noticed him. She was startled to see him frisking about and caught me by the hand lest the fearful creature should bite me. A little while back I had been sobbing but now I burst out laughing to see my mother so frightened.

Mother : "Oh, it's a baby deer. Where did you find it?"

I related the entire history of the baby deer and its tragic outcome, from beginning to end. "*Amma*, he runs so fast that another person would not have been able to catch him at all. He was going like the wind. Kazaki chased him for five or six hours, that is why he got late and *Babuji* sacked him. He took away everything—belt and turban and spear. What will the poor man do now? He will die of starvation."

Mother : "Where is Kazaki? Go and call him here."

I said, "He is outside. He asked to be forgiven his faults."

All this time Mother was under the impression that I was joking. Perhaps she thought that *Babuji* had scolded Kazaki. But my last comment made her suspicious. Had Kazaki really been sacked? She went out and called, "Kazaki, Kazaki," but Kazaki was nowhere to be seen. I called several times but Kazaki was not there.

I had my dinner just the same. Children do not give up eating on account of grief, especially when they are offered *rabri*. But I lay thinking far into the night, "If I had the money I would have given Kazaki a lakh of rupees and told him, "Don't ever speak to *Babuji*." Poor fellow. He will starve. I wonder if he'll come tomorrow. Why should he come now? But he said he would. Tomorrow I shall ask him to eat with me."

I fell asleep building castles in the air.

### 3

I spent the next day looking after my baby deer. First he had a *namkaran* ceremony. He was named Munnu. Then I introduced him to all my classfellows and playmates. In one day he became so friendly that he began to follow me around. In that short space of time I assigned to him an important place in my life. I also resolved to have a special room made for him in the palace

I would build at some future date. I made a scheme to provide him with a bed and a phaeton in which he could go for an outing.

But as soon as evening fell, I ran to the road and stood there waiting for Kazaki. I knew that Kazaki had been sacked and he had no need to come any more. Even so, for no reason, I had a feeling that he was coming. Suddenly I remembered that Kazaki must be starving. I filled a basket with flour and carried it out of the house, leaving a trail of flour on the ground as I ran. I had just gained the road when I saw Kazaki approach. He had a spear on his shoulder and a belt at his waist. He wore a turban too. The mail-bag was tied to the spear. I ran and clasped him by the waist and asked in wonder, "Where did you get the belt and spear, Kazaki?"

Lifting me to his shoulder he said, "What good was that belt, *Bhaiya*? That was a symbol of servitude, this one is a symbol of my happiness. Earlier I served the Government, now I shall serve you."

As he talked he caught sight of the basket and asked, "What is this flour for, *Bhaiya*?"

I replied with some embarrassment, "I brought it for you. You must be hungry. You couldn't have eaten today."

I could not see Kazaki's eyes because I was sitting on his shoulder. But his voice told me that there was a tightness in his throat. He said, "Will I eat dry *rotis*? There is nothing else—no *dal*, salt or *ghee*."

I felt mortified over my mistake. True, how could the poor fellow eat dry *rotis*? But how could I get salt, *dal* and *ghee*? Mother must be in the kitchen now. I had somehow managed to run away with the flour. (I didn't know then that the theft had been discovered, the trail of *atta* having given me away.) But how could I bring three things? Mother would never give them to me if I asked her. She made me beg for hours on end for a single paisa, why should she give me so much? Suddenly I remembered something. I had a few annas tucked away in my bag. I enjoyed collecting coppers and these added up to annas. I don't know why I have lost this habit now. Had I retained it I would not have been such a pauper.

*Babuji* never petted me but he gave me plenty of money. Being a busy man, perhaps he found this the easiest way to get rid of me. If he refused, there was the danger that I would cry and throw a



tantrum. He took care to ward off this interruption well in advance. But Mother's temperament was just the opposite. My tears and tantrums did not interrupt her work in any way. One can put up with the sound of crying all day long if one had nothing to do. But if you are doing accounts, a raised voice is disturbing. Mother was very fond of me but at the very mention of money, she began to frown. I had no books but I did have a bag in which I kept some postal forms, folded up to look like a book. I thought, 'Wouldn't that much money be enough to buy *dal*, salt and *ghee*? I can hardly hold it in my fist'. Having made up my mind I said, "All right, put me down and I shall bring you *dal* and salt. But you will come every day, won't you?"

Kazaki : "If you give me food, why shouldn't I come?"

I said : "I shall give you food every day."

I got down, rushed and brought him my entire capital. If I had owned the Kohinoor diamond, I would not have hesitated to offer it to Kazaki at that moment, only to tempt him to come every day.

Kazaki asked in surprise, "Where did you get all this money?"

I answered proudly, "It's mine."

Kazaki : "Your mother will spank you. She will say, 'Kazaki must have coaxed you into bringing money.' Little one, buy some sweets for yourself with this money and put the flour back in the bin. I shall not starve. I have a pair of hands. Why should I starve?"

I insisted that the money belonged to me but Kazaki did not take it. He took me for a long ride on his back, sang songs to me and finally, having taken me home, he left. He put down the basket of flour at our door.

No sooner had I stepped inside than my mother pounced on me, saying, "You thief, where did you take the flour? Now you are learning to steal! To whom did you give the flour? Out with it or I shall skin you alive!"

I froze. Mother in a temper was like a lioness. Nonplussed, I said, "I haven't given it to anybody."

Mother : "Didn't you take out some flour? See how much flour is scattered all over the courtyard."

I stood silent. She threatened and cajoled me by turns but my lips were sealed. I was terrified to think of the punishment that was impending. I didn't even have the courage to say, "Why are you

so annoyed? The flour is at our door." Nor could I bring the basket in myself. It seemed as if I had lost the power to act and my feet were incapable of movement.

All at once Kazaki called, "*Bahuji*, the *atta* is at the door. *Bhaiya* had brought it for me".

At these words Mother went to the door. She did not observe *purdah* before Kazaki. I don't know if she said anything to Kazaki or not, but she came back with an empty basket. Then she went into her room, took something out of a box and made for the door again.

I saw that her fist was closed. I could no longer remain standing where I was.

I ran after Mother. She called several times for Kazaki but he had gone.

I said with great daring, "Mother, shall I go and look for him?" Mother closed the door and said, "How will you go out in the dark? He was here just now. I told him to stay there and that I would be coming. Heaven knows where he slipped away. He is very shy. Wouldn't take the flour at all. I forcibly tied it up in his *angochha*. I feel very sorry for the poor fellow. Who knows if there is any food in his house or not. I brought some money to give him but heaven knows where he's gone." At this I also picked up courage. I related the entire story of my theft. Parents can teach their children much more by mixing with them as slightly wiser children, than they can by conducting themselves as older people.

Mother said, "Why didn't you ask me? Would I have denied Kazaki a little flour?"

I made no reply. But I thought to myself, 'At the moment you are feeling sorry for Kazaki so you can give him what you please. But if I had asked you, you would have rushed to give me a beating.' However, I was happy to know that Kazaki would no longer starve. Mother would feed him every day and he would give me joy-rides on his back.

Next day I did nothing but play with Munnu. In the evening I went and stood on the road. Darkness fell, but there was no trace of Kazaki. Lamps were lighted, slowly the road became deserted, but Kazaki did not come.

I went home crying. Mother asked, "Why are you crying, son? Is it because Kazaki hasn't come?"

I began to cry even louder. Mother hugged me to her heart. It seemed to me that her throat was choking.

She said, "Be quiet, son. Tomorrow I shall send a runner to call Kazaki."

I fell asleep crying. As soon as I woke up the following morning, I said to Mother, "Please call Kazaki."

Mother said, "A man has been sent. Kazaki must be on his way." I began to play happily. I knew that Mother always kept her word. She had despatched a runner early in the morning. At ten o'clock, when I came home with Munnu, I learnt that Kazaki was not at home. He had not come home even at night. His wife was weeping and wondering where he had gone. She was afraid he had run away.

Nobody can comprehend what tender hearts children have. They do not have the words to express themselves. They do not even know what is troubling them, why they feel like crying again and again, and why they sit dejected and are unwilling to play. I was in such a state. I wandered in and out of the house or on the road. My eyes were searching for Kazaki. Where was he? Had he really run away?

In the afternoon I stood on the road like one lost. Suddenly I saw Kazaki in one of the lanes. Yes, it was Kazaki. I ran after him crying, but he was not in the lane. He had disappeared somewhere. I searched the lane from one end to the other, but there was no trace of Kazaki. When I went home, I told Mother all about it. I had a feeling that even she became very worried on hearing this.

After this, Kazaki was not seen for a couple of days. I too had begun to forget him. Children are as affectionate in the beginning as they are heartless later on. They may even break the very toy that was their most precious possession but a few days ago.

Another few days went by. It was midday. *Babuji* was taking his lunch. I was tying little brass bells around Munnu's feet. A woman with a *ghuighat* came and stood in the courtyard. Her clothes were torn and dirty but she herself was fair and good-looking. She asked me, "*Bhaiya*, where is mother?"

I went close to her and looking at her asked, "Who are you and what do you sell?"

Woman : "I don't sell anything. I have brought you these lotus seeds. You are very fond of them, aren't you?"

I looked eagerly at the small bundle dangling from her hands and

asked, "Let's see. Where did you bring them from?"

Woman : "Your runner has sent them, *Bhaiya*."

I jumped, "Kazaki?"

The woman bowed her head.

Mother : "What is Kazaki doing these days?"

The woman began to cry, "*Bahuji*, he has been ill from the very day that he took the flour from you. He keeps crying for *Bhaiya* all the time. His whole being is wrapped up in *Bhaiya*. He starts and runs to the door calling *Bhaiya*, *Bhaiya*. I don't know what has come over him, *Bahuji*. One day he left home without a word to me. He concealed himself in a lane and kept looking at *Bhaiya*. But when *Bhaiya* saw him, he ran away. He is too shy to come to you."

I said, "Yes, of course. Didn't I tell you that day, Mother?"

Mother : "Is there any food in the house?"

Woman : "Yes, *Bahuji*, by your blessings, we have no trouble of that kind. This morning he got up and left for the pond. I begged of him not to go out lest he should catch a chill but he did not listen. His legs shook from weakness but he went right into the pond and plucked these lotus seeds. Then he told me, 'Take them to *Bhaiya*. He is very fond of lotus seeds. Get me news of his welfare'."

I had taken the lotus seeds out of the bundle and was merrily sampling them. Mother frowned at me but how could I restrain myself?

Mother said, "Tell him, all is well."

I added, "Tell him that I want to see him. If he doesn't come, I shall never speak to him again, so there!"

*Babuji* had also come out, having finished his meal. Wiping his hands and face with a towel he said, "Also tell him that Sahib has given him back his job. He is to join at once, otherwise someone else might be engaged."

The woman picked up her piece of cloth and left. Mother called to her again and again but she did not stop. Perhaps Mother wanted to give her some provisions.

Mother asked, "Has he really been given back his job?"

*Babuji* : "What else? Am I calling him on false pretences? I had reported his reinstatement on the fifth day."

Mother : "You did very well."

*Babuji* : "This is the only cure for his illness."



When I woke up in the morning, what should I see but Kazaki coming along, walking with the help of his stick. He had become very thin. In fact he seemed to have grown old. A tree in full verdure had withered and become a stump. I ran towards him and clasped him around the waist. Kazaki kissed my cheeks and tried to pick me up and seat me on his shoulder. But he could not lift me. Then he went down on all fours. I climbed on his back and we made for the post office. I could not contain myself for joy and perhaps Kazaki was even happier.

*Babuji* said, "Kazaki, you have been reinstated. You must never be late again."

Kazaki fell down crying at Father's feet. But perhaps, I was not destined to enjoy this dual happiness. When I got Munnu I lost Kazaki; when Kazaki came back, Munnu was gone and to this day I mourn for him. Munnu used to eat out of my *thali*. Till I sat down to a meal, he would not eat either. He was very fond of rice, but unless a good amount of *ghee* had been added, he was not satisfied. He went to sleep and woke up with me. He was so clean that he went out into the fields to relieve himself. He disliked dogs and would not let one enter the house. If he saw a dog, he would get up in the middle of a meal and chase it out of the house.

When I left Kazaki at the post office and went home for my lunch, Munnu joined me. We had just begun when a large, shaggy dog appeared in the courtyard and Munnu ran after it. A dog is like a mouse in another's house. The shaggy dog ran when he saw Munnu. Munnu should have turned back then, but that dog was like the messenger of Yamaraj for him. Munnu was not content to drive him out of the house. He began to chase him across the field facing the house. Perhaps Munnu forgot that this area did not come under his jurisdiction. He had reached an area where he and the dog had equal rights. Munnu had chased so many dogs that he had perhaps grown proud of his strength. He forgot that at home he had the backing of his master. As soon as he reached this field, the dog caught Munnu by the throat. Poor Munnu did not even utter a sound. When the neighbours raised a tumult, I ran. Munnu was lying dead and the dog was nowhere to be seen.



## Divine Justice

(*Ishwariye Nyay*)

**I**N Kanpur district there lived a big landlord named Pundit Bhrigu Dutt. Munshi Satyanarayan was his clerk. He was a very loyal and noble person. Lakhs of rupees by way of revenue and thousands of maunds of grain passed through his hands but he was never tempted. As a result of his excellent management the estate prospered from day to day. He was treated with even greater respect than is due to such a conscientious servant. On every occasion, happy or sad, Punditji was very generous towards him. Gradually, confidence in Munshiiji increased to such an extent that Punditji stopped looking into the accounts. It is possible that they would have pulled on in this manner to the end of their lives but destiny willed it otherwise.

When Kumbh was held in Prayag, Punditji went for a dip. He never came back. It is not known whether he slipped and fell into a hole or some creature living in the water dragged him away,

but he was not heard of again. Now Munshi Satyanarayan's authority increased even more. In Punditji's house the only people were his unfortunate widow, Bhanu Kunwari and two small children. One day when she was free from the last rites, the grief-stricken woman sent for him and said tearfully, "Lala, Punditji has left us in midstream. Now only you can see us across. You have planted this garden and I entrust it to your care. These are your children. Look after them. As long as the master was alive he looked upon you as his own brother. I have full faith that you will continue to shoulder this burden as before."

Satyanarayan was also crying. He replied, "*Bhabi, Bhaiya's* going away has been most unfortunate, for he would have made a man out of me. He has been my benefactor all these years and I shall die in his service. Please take comfort and don't worry about anything. As long as I live I shall be ready to serve you. All I request you to do is, scold the people against whom I complain otherwise they will become cheeky."

For several years after this Munshi continued to manage the estate. He was very competent. There was never a discrepancy of even a cowrie in the accounts. He came to be respected in the entire district. People forgot Punditji, as it were. He used to attend durbars and committee meetings and district authorities regarded him as the zamindar. He was respected by other rich people too. But an increase in respect is a costly commodity and Bhanu Kunwari, like other women, could not easily part with money. She was not acquainted with the working of a man's mind. Punditji was always giving gifts and rewards to Lalaji. He knew that material well-being was a prop of honesty, second to enlightenment alone. Apart from this, he occasionally examined the papers himself. Although it was in name only, this watchfulness created a sense of fear. And the greatest enemy of honesty is opportunity. Bhanu Kunwari was not aware of these things. Caught in the clutches of powerful enemies like opportunity and want of money, how could Munshi's integrity escape untarnished?

Adjacent to Kanpur, right on the banks of the Ganges there was a very populous and fertile village. Punditji had wished to buy

this village and build a *pucca ghat*, a temple, a garden and a house along the river bank. But his wish was unfulfilled. As luck would have it, this village was now being sold. Its *zamindar* was a *Thakur Sahib*. He was involved in some criminal suit. He needed money to fight the case. Munshiji heard of this in the courts. The bargain was struck quickly. Both parties were in need. They did not take long to come to a settlement. The deed was drawn up and registered. Munshiji did not have the money in hand but he had standing in the city. Thirty thousand rupees were obtained from a *mahajan* and presented to *Thakur Sahib*. To facilitate things, Munshiji had all the transactions done in his own name because the master's boys were still minors. Purchasing property in their names would have caused a lot of complications and the delay might have resulted in the quarry slipping away. Deed in hand, and supremely happy, Munshiji went to Bhanu Kunwari. He gave her the good news as she sat in *purdah*. Bhanu Kunwari thanked him with tears in her eyes. They decided to build a *mandir* and a *ghat* in memory of Punditji.

The very next day Munshiji visited the village. The tenants brought offerings to welcome the new master. There was a feast for the gentry. People went boating on the river Ganges. An attractive spot, away from the settlement, was chosen for building the temple and other things.

## 3

Although Munshiji had no evil intentions when he first took over the village in his own name, in just a few days' time an idea took root and began to grow slowly. Munshiji kept a separate account of the income and expenditure relating to this village and did not consider it necessary to explain it to his mistress. Bhanu Kunwari did not think it proper to interfere in these matters but on hearing stories from the other employees she was afraid lest Munshiji should betray her. She hid her feelings from Munshiji for fear that the servants might have fabricated this story to harm him.

Several years went by in this manner. Now the seed of treachery had assumed the proportions of a tree. Bhanu Kunwari began to see portents of Munshiji's evil intentions. In Munshiji's heart,



legal quibbling triumphed over justice. He convinced himself that the village belonged to him. True, he was a debtor of Bhanu Kunwari to the extent of thirty thousand rupees. At the most she would take her money back, what more could she do? But deep down on both sides the fire was smouldering. Munshiji was fully armed and waiting for an attack and Bhanu Kunwari was looking for a suitable opportunity. One day she made bold and calling Munshiji said to him, "Lalaji, when will you start work on the Bargada temple? It is eight years since the land was purchased. It would be good to start the work now. Life is so uncertain. Whatever is to be done should be done." By raising the issue in this manner Bhanu Kunwari gave a good account of her astuteness. In his heart of hearts Munshiji was also impressed by it. He considered a little and said, "I have several times thought of doing it but suitable land is not available. The land along the bank of the Ganges is being cultivated by the tenants and they are not willing to give it up under any circumstances."

Bhanu Kunwari : "I have learnt this only today. Eight years have gone by, but you have never mentioned this village even by mistake. I have no idea of the revenue or the profit or of what kind of a village it is. I don't know whether there is any area under cultivation. Whatever is done will always be done by you but I should also be in the know."

Munshiji was alerted. He realised that it would be difficult to get the better of this astute lady. But when he had already resolved to take the village why should he be afraid? He said "You were not concerned with it, that is why I did not consider it proper to trouble you unnecessarily."

This was like a blow to Bhanu Kunwari. She emerged from behind the *purdah*, glared at Munshiji and said, "What is that you said? Did you purchase the village for me or for yourself? Did I give the money or did you? Was the expenditure incurred yours or mine? I can't understand you!"

Munshiji replied cautiously, "The village is registered in my name. You know this. The money spent was undoubtedly yours and I am indebted to that extent. As for the expenses incurred on the realisation of revenue, these I have paid from my own pocket. I have been maintaining an account of all the income and expenditure."

Trembling with rage Bhanu Kunwari said, "You will certainly

be repaid for this treachery. You cannot slit my children's throats in this heartless manner. I was not aware that you had a dagger hidden in your bosom, why else should things have come to this pass? Very well, from today please don't touch my cash or ledgers. I shall take whatever is mine. Go and think over it in solitude. No one can prosper through evil. You must be thinking, 'The boys are orphans. I shall swallow their property'. Don't be under this misconception. I shall have the very bricks of your house put up for sale."

Having said this Bhanu Kunwari again went and sat down behind the *purdah* and began to cry. When they have been angry women look for an excuse to cry. Lala Sahib could not think of a suitable reply. He went to the office and began to shuffle through papers. But Bhanu Kunwari followed him to the office and snapped at him, "Don't touch any of my papers or you'll be sorry. You are a venomous snake. I don't want to see your face."

Munshiji wished to make some changes in the records but he was rendered helpless. He threw down the key to the money-chest, hurled aside the account books, banged the doors and went out like a blast of wind. He had set his hand to treachery but did not know the art.

When the other servants came to know of the state of affairs they were overjoyed. They did not stand a chance in the presence of Munshiji. They came to Bhanu Kunwari to add fuel to the fire. Everyone was agreed on the point that Munshi Satyanarayan had committed a breach of trust. The retribution would be terrible.

Both parties began to prepare for litigation. On one side was the body of the law, on the other its spirit.

Bhanu Kunwari asked Lala Chhakkan Lal, "Who is our lawyer?" Chhakkan Lal peered around and said, "The lawyer is Sethji but he must be in Satyanarayan's control already. For this case we need a very capable lawyer. Mehra Babu has a roaring practice these days. He even dictates to the judges. He argues like a car at full speed. *Sirkar*\*, he has saved many people from the gallows! What more can I say? No lawyer can open his mouth before him. If *sirkar* says so, we can engage him."

Chhakkan Lal's exaggerated praise created a doubt. Bhanu Kunwari said, "No. First let us ask Sethji; thereafter we shall see.

\*Head of Government or household

Please go and call him."

Chhakkan Lal went to Sethji, cursing his ill luck. Even during the lifetime of Pundit Bhrigu Dutt, Sethji had been attending to his legal affairs. When he heard about the case he was stunned. He had considered Satyanarayan an honest and upright man. His fall caused him great sorrow. He came at once. Bhanu Kunwari wept as she related her tale of woe and presenting both her boys before him she said, "Please protect these orphans. I entrust them to you."

Sethji broached the topic of a compromise. He said, "It is not good to fight with your own people."

Bhanu Kunwari : "It is only right to fight the unjust."

Sethji : "But our side is weak."

Once again Bhanu Kunwari emerged from behind the curtain and asked in amazement, "Is our side weak? The world knows that the village belongs to us. Who can take it away from us? No, I shall never agree to a compromise. Please go through the papers. Please take this trouble for the sake of my children. Your efforts will not go waste. Satyanarayan had no evil intentions in the beginning. An expense of thirty thousand rupees has been shown against the date on which the village was purchased. If he has entered this as a debt against his name, please check if he has paid the interest every year or not. I shall never come to terms with such a monster of a man."

Sethji realised that under the circumstances nothing would be achieved by trying to reason with her. He looked through the papers and began to prepare for legal proceedings.



Munshi Satyanarayan reached home mortified. When his son asked for sweets he gave him a beating. He scolded his wife for letting the boy come to him. He scolded his old mother, "Can't you even amuse a child? I come home tired after a whole day and then I am supposed to play with the boy. As if I have no other work in the world!" Having raised a hue and cry in the house he came out and began to think, 'I have made a big blunder. What a fool I am! For so many days the papers were in my hands. I could have done what I liked, but I took no action. This

occurred to me only today when I found myself in trouble. Had I wished I could have made new ledgers and account books in which there was no mention at all of either this village or the money. But thanks to my stupidity, Lakshmi who had come to my house is now turning away. How could I know that the witch would behave like this and not even let me touch the papers?’

While reflecting in this manner, Munshiji suddenly jumped up. He thought of a way out. ‘Why shouldn’t I win over the workers? Although they are annoyed with me on account of my strictness and may not even talk to me properly at this time, there isn’t even one amongst them who cannot be brought under my control through temptation. To be sure money will have to be spent like water. But where will I get all that money? Curse my luck! Had I been alerted a few days earlier there would have been no problem. How could I know that this witch would turn so menacing? Now there is only one way out. Somehow or other I should spirit away the papers. It calls for great stealth but it will have to be done.’

Once having yielded to evil desires it becomes difficult to go back to one’s former self. Caught in the quagmire of sin a man goes down steadily. A serious person like Munshi Satyanarayan was now wondering how to commit a theft. He thought, ‘Is it easy to commit a theft? Look at the skill it calls for, the courage and brains. Who says it is easy to commit a theft? If I’m caught, I shall have no option but to commit suicide.’ Even after prolonged consideration Munshiji could not trust himself to perform such a desperate deed. He thought of an easier way out . . . ‘Why not set fire to the office? All I need is a bottle of kerosene and a box of matches. I can engage a ruffian to do it, but how do I know the ledgers are still in the same room? That witch must have removed them to her own room. No, setting fire would be useless.’

For a long time Munshiji kept tossing in bed. He made new plans, raised counter-arguments and rejected them. During the rainy season clouds keep taking new shapes and the wind is constantly destroying these shapes. Munshiji’s plans were in a similar state at the moment. But even in the midst of this turmoil, one thought was constant—somehow or other he should gain possession of the papers. Admittedly it was a difficult task but if he didn’t have the guts why did he enter into this conflict? A property worth thirty thousand was not easy to grab. Whatever



means he might employ, theft was the only answer. After all people who committed thefts were also human beings. It was just a matter of taking the plunge. If successful, he would be rich. If he fell on the way, he would lose his life.

## 5

It was ten o'clock at night. Munshi Satyanarayan emerged from his house with a bunch of keys tucked under his arm. At the door there was a pile of straw. When he saw it, he was startled. His heart began to pound for fear. It seemed someone was lurking there. His footsteps faltered. He looked at the straw carefully and detected no movement. Thereupon he took courage, stepped forward and began to reassure himself, 'How stupid I am! Why should I fear anyone at my own door or even on the road, for that matter? I'm going my way, nobody can question me. Of course, if I'm seen making a hole in the wall or rather caught at it, then there is reason to be afraid. Even then one can think of a way of escape.'

All of a sudden he saw one of Bhanu Kunwari's peons approaching. His heart beat violently. He leapt and took refuge in a dark alley. For a long time he stood there. When the peon had disappeared from view he emerged again. Till that morning the peon had been his slave; he had often cursed him, even kicked him. But today he had grown faint at the sight of him.

He again fell to arguing with himself. 'It seems as if I am under the influence of *bhang*. Why else should I have been so scared of this peon? Even if he had seen me how could he have harmed me? Thousands are walking on the road. I am one of them. Is he omniscient? Can he look into the hearts of men? Had he seen me he would have *salaamed* me respectfully and might even have given me some news. But I was so terrified that I did not even show him my face.' Having thus calmed his fears, he moved forward. In truth a heart caught in the meshes of sin is like an autumn leaf which falls with the slightest gust of wind.

Munshiji reached the bazar. Most of the shops had closed. Bulls and cows were sitting there chewing the cud. Only the *halwais'* shops were open and here and there flower vendors were calling their wares. All the *halwais* knew Munshiji, so he lowered

his head, altered his gait and walked briskly. All at once he saw a carriage coming. It was the carriage of Seth Ballabhdas, the lawyer. Thousands of times he had gone to court with Sethji in this carriage but today the carriage appeared as fearful as the God of Death himself. He immediately entered a vacant shop. The bull resting there thought Munshiji had come to evict him. He stood up, head lowered and snorting, but in the meantime the carriage had gone and Munshiji breathed freely again. This time he could not take comfort in arguments. He realised that it would be of no avail under the circumstances. It was a mercy that the lawyer did not see him. He was a fox. One look at Munshiji's face and he would have gauged the situation.

Some learned people have said that man's natural inclination is towards sin but this is only a conjecture, not supported by actual experience. The truth is that man is by nature afraid of sin and we can see clearly how he despises it.

A furlong ahead Munshiji came to a lane. This was one of the ways leading to Bhanu Kunwari's house. A lantern was burning dimly. As Munshiji had anticipated, the watchman was nowhere to be seen. The *chamars* living in the stables were holding a dance. Several of their women were all dressed up and dancing. The *chamars* played the *mridang* and sang :

"Krishna is away from home, the clouds have gathered;  
I saw a dream while I slept, O Ram!

I woke and the *kajal* was washed away in tears,

Krishna is away from home, the clouds have gathered!"

Both the watchmen were watching the show. Munshiji walked softly to the lantern and, pouncing on it the way a cat pounces on a mouse, he put it out. The first stage was over and the task had not proved as difficult as he had imagined. He felt a little reassured. He gained the verandah leading to the office and stood there listening attentively. There was dead silence all round. Only the clamour from the *chamars'* quarters could be heard. At the moment Munshiji's heart was pounding, his head throbbed, his hands and feet trembled and his breath came in gasps. He was alert in every pore. All his faculties were aroused and assisting his will power.

There was the same old lock on the office door. He had obtained a key to it after searching for a long time in the bazar. The lock opened and the door protested mildly. Nobody paid any attention to the sound. Munshiji entered the office. There was a lighted

lamp inside. The flame shook once as if to stop him from going into the room.

Munshiji's legs were trembling. His heels barely rested on the ground. The burden of sin was insupportable.

In a moment Munshiji had opened the ledger. The entries swam before his eyes. He had no time to sort out the relevant papers. He piled all the ledgers, tied them into a bundle and placing them on his head shot out of the room like an arrow. With that bundle of sin on his head he was soon lost in the dark lane.

He walked barefoot through narrow, dark, evil-smelling, slushy lanes, with a burden of self-interest, greed and deceit on his head as if a sinful soul were being carried along the drains of hell.

After wandering about for a long time he reached the banks of the Ganges. Just as a heart blackened by sin has a glimmer of devoutness, there were stars twinkling on the dark surface of the river. Enveloped by smoke rising from burning incense, several *sadhus* lay on the bank. The flame of enlightenment was burning without and not within the heart. Munshiji put down his bundle, tied it securely in a sheet and using all his force threw it into the river. There was a moment of tumult among the slumbering waves, then all was silence once again.

## 6

There were two women in Munshiji's house, his mother and his wife. Munshiji went to his mother and said, "What will happen now? Bhanu Kunwari has dismissed me."

Thoroughly perturbed, the mother asked, "Dismissed you?"

Munshi : "Yes, for no fault of mine."

Mother : "Whatever happened? Bhanu Kunwari is not that kind of a person."

Munshi : "It was a trivial matter. I have appropriated the village that I bought in my name. We did some plain-speaking yesterday. I told her that the village was mine, I had bought it in my name and she had no stake in it. That was all. She lost her temper and talked a lot of nonsense. She sacked me on the spot and threatened to fight for the village and take it back. Today she will file a suit against me but what does that matter, the village is under my control. She can file not one but a thousand suits but

the verdict will be in my favour."

The mother cast a meaningful look at her daughter-in-law and said, "Son, didn't you purchase the village for her, with her money?"

Munshi : "That was long ago. Now I can't give up such a rich and populous village. She can't do me any harm. She can't even take back her money. She has a hundred and fifty villages but still she is not content."

Mother : "If one has a lot of wealth one doesn't throw it away. You succumbed to temptation and that was not a good thing to do. What will people say? All right, forget about the people. Did it behove you to deceive someone who has sheltered you all these years and provided you with a livelihood? What hasn't God given you? You have enough for all your needs. You have money and a family, what else do you want? Take my advice, don't tarnish your name, don't earn an evil reputation. One prospers on an honest income; ill-gotten gains never do any good."

Munshi : "I have heard this before. If the world were to work in this fashion, everything would come to a standstill. I have served them all these years. It was on account of me that they added half a dozen villages to their estate. While Punditji was alive my honesty was valued. It was not necessary for me to cheat, he compensated me of his own accord. He died eight years ago and the lady has not offered me so much as a *paan*! Thanks to me, she has been saving thousands of rupees every month. Did it ever occur to her that since I worked so honestly, I was also entitled to a share in the profits? Don't call it by that name. Give it as a reward but do give it. On the contrary she thought that for twenty rupees a month I had become her slave. I have been patient for eight years. What shall I do now? Continue to be a slave at twenty rupees a month and leave behind children who would be dependent upon other people? Now I have got this chance, why should I miss it? Why should I die hankering after property? As long as I live I shall enjoy it. After me, my children shall live in comfort."

His mother's eyes filled with tears. She said, "I have never before heard you say such a thing. What has come over you? You have a family. Don't play with fire."

The wife looked at the mother-in-law and said, "We don't want wealth procured in this manner. We are content with our *dal* and *roti*."

Munshi : "Fine. You eat *dal-roti* and wear coarse cloth. I must



now have fine fare."

Mother : "I shall not be a witness to such evil. I shall drown myself in the Ganges."

Wife : "If you are bent upon sowing thorns, first reach me to my father's house. I shall not stay in this house with my children."

The Munshi replied irritably, "You have taken leave of your senses. Lakhs of government employees exact bribes from people night and day and live in comfort. Nothing happens to their children, nor are they ever stricken with a pestilence. If evil does not destroy them, why should it destroy me? I have always seen good and honest people suffer hardships. For my part I am going to enjoy the fruits of my action. You may do as you please."

## 7

In the morning when the office was opened the papers were missing. In a flurry Munshi Chhakkanlal went to the house and asked his mistress, "Have you had the papers removed from the office?"

Bhanu Kanwari said, "I know nothing of all this. They must be where you kept them."

At this the whole house was thrown into confusion. The watchmen were beaten up. Bhanu Kunwari at once suspected Munshi Satyanarayan but she felt that such a thing could not have been done without the collusion of Chhakkanlal. A report was lodged with the police. An *ojha*\* was summoned to divine the name of the culprit. Maulvi Sahib also used his powers of divination. The *ojha* said that it was the work of an old enemy. Maulvi Sahib pronounced, "Someone with inside information about the house has done this." Thereupon they began to discuss how they would fight a case without the papers. They were already the weaker party. All their strength lay in these ledgers. Now even the proof was lost. There was no substance in the claim. But Bhanu Kunwari said "Never mind if we are defeated. If someone snatches away our property it is our duty to fight with all our strength. To sit back defeated is the work of cowards." When Sethji heard of this calamity, he too was of the opinion that the case had no strength left. They could only rely on circumstantial evidence and argument.

\*oxorcist

The court may or may not accept this. But Bhanu Kunwari was adamant. Two capable barristers were sent for from Allahabad and Lucknow. The proceedings began.

The case was the talk of the town. Bhanu Kunwari had cited many of the rich folk of the town as her witnesses. At the time of the hearing thousands flocked to the court. The main attraction was the fact that Bhanu Kunwari herself watched the proceedings from behind a curtain. She no longer had any faith in her servants.

The barrister for the complainant delivered a very moving address. He drew a very vivid picture of Satyanarayan's material status in the past. He showed how loyal, capable and dutiful he used to be and how it was perfectly natural for Pundit Bhrigu Dutt to develop absolute faith in him. Thereafter he proved that Munshi Satyanarayan's pecuniary position was never such as to enable him to amass so much wealth. Finally he drew such a repulsive picture of Munshiji's selfishness, unkindness, dishonesty and treachery that people began to curse him. At the same time he gave a pitiable description of the condition of Punditji's children. It was a matter for great sorrow and shame that a person so noble and competent should stoop so low as to have no qualms about depriving his late master's children of their inheritance. It was difficult to find such a sad and heart-rending example of human degradation. As a result of his evil deeds, the virtue of that man's former celebrated qualities had been destroyed. They were not real pearls but only imitation glass beads which had been displayed to win confidence. It was only an attractive net spread for the purpose of ensnaring a simple-hearted, rich man who was far removed from the evil found in this world. How hard, dark and full of evil was this monster in human shape and what an unholy deed he had committed! It was permissible to forgive one's enemies once but this villainous individual had deceived those who should have been treated with kindness, in keeping with the laws of human nature. If they still had the ledgers with them, the court would have had ample evidence of the truthfulness of Satyanarayan! But the very fact that the ledgers disappeared from the office directly after Munshiji was dismissed was substantial proof for the court.

Many of the elite in the town gave evidence but their statements were based on hearsay and broke down on cross-examination. The hearing was resumed the following day. The lawyer for the defence began his address which contained more wit than serious

argument. "It is a strange principle of justice that whatever a rich man's servant buys is deemed to be the property of his master. In accordance with this principle, our Government should confiscate the total assets of its employees. We have no objection in admitting that we could not have arranged for so much money and this sum was taken on loan from our employer. But instead of demanding repayment of the loan we are told to give up the property itself! If the accounts are examined, they will show clearly that the entire loan has been paid off. Our friend has observed that in such circumstances the loss of the ledgers is a proof in itself. I support this argument. If I borrow money from you for my marriage, will you take away my newly-wedded wife?

"Our learned friend has accused us of deceiving orphans. If Munshi Satyanarayan had any evil intentions, the best opportunity for him would have been at the time when Pundit Bhriugu Dutt passed away. Why did he have to wait so long? If you trap a lion but don't catch the cub at the same time, and instead, let him grow and gather strength, I shall not call you wise. The fact is that Munshi Satyanarayan has discharged his moral obligations to his employer. For eight years he has served his master's children, heart and soul. The reward that is being given to him today is most depressing and heart-breaking. This is not Bhanu Kunwari's fault. She is a gifted lady but she suffers from the faults inherent in her sex. An honest person is naturally outspoken. He does not need to embellish his statements. That is why Munshiji's soft-spoken assistants found an opportunity to attack him. That is the root of this law-suit, nothing else.

"Bhanu Kunwari is present here. Can she say that in this span of eight years the village was ever mentioned before her? Were the profit and loss, income and expenditure, and other transactions ever discussed with her? Suppose I am a government employee. If I begin to recite in the office the tale of my wife's income and expenses, and the taxes paid by my servants, perhaps I would soon lose my job. It is also possible that for a while I may be lodged in the great guest-house at Bareilly\*. When Bhanu Kunwari had nothing to do with that village, why should it be mentioned to her?"

After this a number of witnesses were presented. Most of them were landlords from neighbouring villages. They stated that they

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\*The reference is to the mental hospital at Bareilly.

had seen Munshi Satyanarayan giving the tenants receipts signed in his own name and depositing revenues in the treasury in his own account.

By now it was evening. The court announced that judgement would be delivered in a week's time.

## 8

By now Satyanarayan had no doubts left that he would win. The witnesses for the complainant had been routed and the arguments lacked evidence. Hereafter he would also be counted among landlords and it was possible that he might soon be called a *rais*.<sup>\*</sup> But for some reason Munshiji was shy of looking the aristocrats of the town in the eye. The moment he saw them he lowered his head. He was afraid lest these people should ask questions on this subject. When he went to the bazar the shopkeepers began to whisper among themselves and people looked askance at him. So far they had taken him to be a noble and enlightened man. The well-to-do of the city had looked upon him with respect and had shown great regard for him. Although Munshiji had not yet heard any adverse comments from these people, something within him told him that they knew the truth. He might win the case but he had now lost his prestige. People would now consider him selfish, treacherous and false. Let alone other people, his own family despised him. His old mother had not taken even a sip of water for three days. His wife begged of him again and again with folded hands to take pity on his beloved children. An evil deed never did bear good fruit. If he was not willing to change his ways, he should poison her first.

Early morning on the day that judgement was to be pronounced, a woman came selling vegetables and said to Munshiji's wife, "*Bahuji*, we have heard some gossip in the market-place. If you don't mind, may I tell you about it? Everyone has the same thing to say : Lala Babu has deceived Punditji's wife and grabbed a piece of land belonging to her. But we just can't believe it. If Lala Babu had not taken charge of things, Punditji's wife would have been finished by now. Not an inch of land would have remained. Only a capable manager like him could have taken everything in hand. Why should he deceive them now? Oh *Bahuji*, we bring no

<sup>\*</sup>A rich man



possession into this world and take away none. All that remains with us is the good or evil that we do. The fruit of evil is evil. Men may not see it, but God sees everything."

*Bahuji* was mortified. She wished that the earth would open up and swallow her. Women are by nature shy. They have a greater degree of self-respect than men. They cannot stand censure or insults. *Munshiji's* wife bowed her head and said, "What do I know of all this? I have heard it from you for the first time today. What vegetables have you got?"

*Munshi Satyanarayan* lay on his bed, listening. When the woman had left he went to his wife and asked, "What did that busybody have to say?"

His wife turned away from him and said with downcast eyes, "Didn't you hear her? She was singing your praises. Because of you I have to bear taunts from so many people and hide from so many more."

*Munshiji* came back to his room without saying anything in reply. He was thoroughly ashamed. A person who has been universally respected, who has walked with his head held high, whose noble deeds have been the talk of the town, can never be totally devoid of shame. A sense of shame is the most formidable enemy of evil. Prompted by evil desires, *Munshiji* had thought that he could carry out his designs in utter secrecy with nobody the wiser, but his wish had not been fulfilled. There had been obstacles on his way. To remove them he had to resort to desperate measures. But even this had been done to avoid being shamed in public. He had not wanted anyone to say that he had deceived his mistress. But in spite of all these efforts he could not escape censure. Even women who sold things in the market-place heaped insults on him. Suppressed though it was by evil desires, his sense of self-respect could not take such a blow. *Munshiji* began to think, 'Now I shall become rich and prosperous, but I shall never be able to escape ignominy or censure. The judgement of the court cannot safeguard me against censure by the people. What are the fruits of wealth? Respect and dignity. If I lose these, what shall I do with wealth? After losing my strength of will, suffering public denunciation, demeaning myself among common folk and sowing the seeds of dissension within my family, of what use will wealth be to me? And if justice be a force and I am punished for this crime, I shall have no option but to blacken my face and run away somewhere. When a

truthful man is in trouble, people sympathise with him. But the troubles of wrong-doers become an object of mockery for others. In the first case, God is denounced as unjust, but the troubles of evil people are cited as proof of His justice. Oh God, deliver me from this predicament. Why shouldn't I fall at the feet of Bhanu Kunwari and beg of her to withdraw the case? Why didn't I think of this before? If I had gone to her even yesterday, all would have been well. But nothing can be done now. Today judgement will be pronounced.'

For a long time Munshiji was lost in thought but he could not decide on a course of action.

By now Bhanu Kunwari was also convinced that she had lost the village. The poor woman could only bemoan her loss. She didn't sleep a wink at night. Every now and then there rose within her a fresh wave of anger against Munshi Satyanarayan. 'What a villain! He is openly robbing me of fifty thousand rupees and I am quite helpless. These days men who dispense justice are totally blind. They can't see what is perfectly plain to others. They are the slaves of papers. Justice should discriminate between right and wrong. It should not get snared in legalities and fall into the traps laid by hypocrites. This is precisely what has encouraged cheats and forgers and scoundrels. Anyhow, let the village go if it can't be helped. But you, Satyanarayan, will no longer be able to show your face in this city!'

This thought brought some peace to Bhanu Kunwari. Man's nature is such that his enemy's losses are dearer to his heart than his own profits. 'You have seized one village of ours. God willing, you will not derive any happiness from it. You will burn in hell and there won't be a soul left to carry on your name.'

The day arrived when judgement was to be pronounced. There was a huge crowd in the court-room. Such great personalities were present who appeared only when an officer was being given a welcome or a farewell. There was a whole battalion of lawyers and attorneys. At the appointed time the judge took his seat. Silence fell upon the vast hall of justice. The clerk took out a document from his box. People moved up a step in their excitement.

The judge announced his decision, "The petition of the complainant is rejected. Both sides should bear their own expenses."

Although the judgement was as expected, the pronouncement of the judge caused a stir among the people. Making desultory com-

ments on the judgement, they slowly began to leave the court-room.

All of a sudden Bhanu Kunwari in a *ghunghat* appeared on the dais. People turned back. Those who had already gone out, rushed in again and stared with curiosity at Bhanu Kunwari.

Bhanu Kunwari addressed the judge in a trembling voice, "My Lord, if you permit me, I would like to ask Munshiji something."

Though this request was against the rules, the judge allowed it out of kindness. Thereupon Bhanu Kunwari looked at Satyanarayan and said, "Lalaji, the court decree has gone in your favour. May this village bring you joy! But integrity is a man's greatest wealth. Tell us honestly, to whom does this village belong?"

Thousands of people heard this question and began to stare expectantly at Munshiji. Munshiji was sunk in deep thought. In his heart there arose a terrible conflict between doubt and desire. Thousands of eyes were fixed on him. The reality was not a secret any more. He could not tell a lie before so many people. Shame had silenced him. It was in his interest to say "Mine". This was easy enough, but he was terrified of the punishment that society would give him for this, the greatest of all crimes. On the other hand, it would be ruinous to say "Yours". That would mean losing a battle that had already been won. But thereafter he had every hope of winning the rich reward that society gives for virtuous deeds. Hope triumphed over fear. He had a feeling that God had given him one last opportunity to clear his name. Even at that stage he could be worthy of respect and save his soul. He stepped forward and wished Bhanu Kunwari. In a trembling voice he said "Yours."

Thousands of men joined in a cry that rose to the skies, "Truth is triumphant".

The judge stood up and said, "This is not legal justice. This is divine justice."

This is not a story but a true episode. Bhanu Kunwari and Satyanarayan are still alive. People were deeply moved by the moral courage shown by Munshiji.

This remarkable victory of divine justice over man-made laws was the talk of the town for several months. Bhanu Kunwari went to Munshiji's house and coaxed him to come back. Then she entrusted her entire business to him and, a few days later, made him a gift of that village. Munshiji did not consider it proper to keep it in his possession, and gave it away in charity. The income from the village is now spent on the welfare of needy people and students.



## The Lottery

**W**HO does not want to get rich quickly? Once when lottery tickets were being sold, my friend Vikram, his father, uncle, mother and brother bought a ticket each. There was no knowing who would be lucky. And whoever the winner, the money would remain within the family.

But Vikram could not restrain himself. If others got the money, who would bother about him? At the most they would give him five or ten thousand. And how could he manage with so little? He had made ambitious plans for the future. First he had to go on a world tour, visiting every single corner of the earth. Peru and Brazil and Timbuctoo and Honolulu were all included in his itinerary. He was not the type that would come flying back in a month or two like a whirlwind. He wished to spend several days in



each place to study the local way of life, customs and traditions, so that he could write a voluminous book on his world tour. Besides, he wished to open a huge library to house all the finest works of the world. He was prepared to spend two lakhs on the library. Of course, a bungalow, a car and furniture were trivial things. If his father or his uncle got the money, he wouldn't receive more than five thousand; if his mother got it, he would receive twenty thousand. But if the lottery came in his brother's name, he would not get even a copper. He was self-respecting. He thought it degrading to accept anything from his family by way of gift or charity. He used to say, "It is better to drown than to ask for charity. When a man finds that he can't make a place for himself in the world, it's time to quit."

He was very restless. His people had bought lottery tickets but who would give him money and how could he ask for it anyway? He thought for a long time and said, "Why don't you and I buy a lottery ticket jointly?"

I liked the suggestion. At that time I was a school master earning twenty rupees a month. I found it difficult to make both ends meet. For me buying a ten-rupee ticket was like buying a white elephant. But, yes, if for one month I saved on milk, *ghee*, snacks and sundry expenses, I could manage five rupees. Even so, I was afraid. If we could get the amount from some other source, it would boost my courage.

Vikram said, "Shall I sell my ring? I'll tell them it slipped off my finger."

The ring was worth at least ten rupees, enough to pay for a whole ticket. If I could get a half share in the ticket without spending any money, what could be better?

Suddenly Vikram spoke again, "But you will have to pay me in cash. I shall not go into partnership unless I get the cash."

Now I thought of the rights and wrongs of the case. I said, "No, this isn't right. If we are found out, we'll be put to shame and I shall be scolded along with you."

At last it was decided that we should sell old books at some second-hand bookshop and buy a ticket with the money. We took out our old books and tied them into a big bundle. I was a school master and felt awkward selling books to a shopkeeper. Everyone knew me, so this job was entrusted to Vikram. In half-an-hour he came jumping and skipping, carrying a ten-rupee note. I had

never seen him so happy. The books were worth no less than forty rupees but those ten rupees had dropped into our laps, as it were. Now we would go halves on the ticket. We would get a sum of ten lakhs; five for me and five for Vikram. We were totally absorbed in the prospect.

I said contentedly, "Five lakhs is not a small sum."

Vikram was not so content by nature. He said, "For us, even five hundred is a lot right now. But I shall have to alter my plans. I cannot shelve the scheme of a world tour, but the library is gone."

I objected. "After all, you won't be spending more than two lakhs on your travels."

"No sir, the budget for that is three-and-a-half lakhs. It is a programme stretching over seven years. That works out to only fifty thousand a year!"

"Four thousand a month! I think you can live very comfortably on two thousand."

Vikram replied hotly, "I want to live in style, not like a beggar."

"Even on two thousand you can live in style."

"Unless you give me two lakhs out of your share, the library cannot be made."

"It isn't necessary to have a library that has no parallel in the city."

"I want just such a library."

"You have a right to want one. But you won't get anything out of my share. Look at my requirements. Your family has enough property and you are not burdened with any responsibility. I am saddled with the responsibility of the entire household—two sisters to marry off, two brothers to educate and a house yet to be built. I have decided to deposit all the money in the bank straightaway and to manage on the interest. I shall lay down some conditions so that nobody can touch the capital even after I am gone."

Vikram said sympathetically, "Yes, in those circumstances it is unfair to ask you for anything. Very well, I shall put up with the inconvenience. But the bank rates have gone down very much."

We investigated the rates of interest offered by several banks on fixed deposits as well as savings accounts. To be sure the rate of interest was very low. It was futile to deposit money on two or two-and-a-half percent interest. Why not start a money-lending business? Vikram would not proceed on his travels for some time. We would live together. When some wealth had been amassed, he

would set out on his travels. Money-lending would bring in a handsome interest and also build up our standing. But, of course, one should not lend money to anyone who could not furnish a substantial security, however trustworthy he might be. And why lend money on security at all? Why not mortgage his property? That would eliminate risk altogether.

Another hurdle had been crossed. Now the question was, in whose name should the ticket be bought? Vikram insisted on buying it in his name, otherwise he would not buy a ticket at all. Since there was no option, I gave my consent without taking anything in writing, on account of which I faced a lot of trouble afterwards.

## 2

One by one, the days of waiting slipped by. As soon as the day dawned, our eyes flew to the calendar. My house was adjacent to Vikram's. Before going to school in the morning and after coming back we sat together to make our plans and did so quietly so that nobody should overhear us. We wanted to guard the secret that we had bought a ticket. How surprised people would be when we won the lottery and this secret was revealed! We did not want to miss the pleasure of that dramatic moment.

One day the topic of marriage cropped up. Vikram said with great solemnity, "I don't want to enter into the fuss and bother of marriage. Pointless worries and tensions! A lot of money will have to be spent satisfying the wife's whims and fancies."

I opposed this. "Yes, that is true, but unless you have someone to share in your joys and sorrows, where's the fun in living? I am not so averse to marriage. I do want a partner who will stay with me till the end, and only a wife can be such a partner."

Vikram spoke with a sharpness that was uncalled for. "Well, people have different points of view. You are welcome to a wife. I shall remain unattached and free to enjoy myself, free to come and go as I please, without a *chowkidar* following me all the time."

Just then Kunti made her appearance. She was Vikram's younger sister, aged about eleven. She was studying in class six and used to fail regularly. Very lively, very pert. She opened the door with such a bang that the two of us leapt to our feet, startled.

Vikram said crossly, "Kunti, you are very naughty. Who asked you to come here?"

Kunti swept the room with a glance like someone from the secret police and said, "What is it that you are always talking about behind closed doors? You are here all the time. You never go for a walk or to a show. Must be weaving a magic spell!"

Vikram caught her by the neck and shook her, "Yes, we are weaving a spell by which you will get a bridegroom who will hammer you every day."

Kunti climbed on his back and said, "I shall marry a man who will do exactly as I say. When *Amma* gets the money from the lottery, she will give me fifty thousand and I shall live in peace. I am praying for *Amma* twice a day. *Amma* says the prayers of unmarried girls never go unanswered. Something tells me *Amma* will definitely get the money."

I remembered how once I had been to the village of my mother's parents. It was the month of *Bhaddon* and not a drop of rain had fallen. The people raised a fund and gave a feast to the unmarried girls of the village. And on the third day there was a downpour! To be sure, a virgin's prayers were potent.

Vikram and I looked at one another meaningfully and arrived at a decision wordlessly. Vikram said to Kunti, "Very well, if we tell you something, you won't go and tell others, will you? Of course not, you are a very good girl, you won't tell anyone. This time I shall coach you seriously and see you through the exams. The fact is that we have also bought a lottery ticket. You must pray to God for us too. If we get the money, we'll give you beautiful ornaments. Honest!"

Kunti did not believe us. She began to make a fuss. When we took a vow to cover her with gold and diamonds from head to foot, she agreed to pray for us.

Kunti could digest maunds of sweets, but she could not contain this little bit of information. She rushed away and within minutes the news had spread all over the house. Everyone began to scold Vikram—mother, uncle and father. Who knows if it was out of concern for Vikram or some other motive? "All you can think of is foolish ideas. You have thrown money down the drain. When so many people from your family had already bought tickets, why did *you* need to buy one? Wouldn't you have got something out of it? And you, Master Sahib, are a perfect fool. Instead of



being a good influence on the boy, you are ruining him."

Vikram was a pampered son. What more could they have said? If he took offence and refused to eat, it would be a calamity. All the anger was vented on me. It was my company that was spoiling the boy.

## 3

Vikram's father, the elder *Thakur Sahib*, and uncle, the younger *Thakur Sahib*, were both materialists and confirmed atheists who mocked at prayer and worship. But these days they had become very devout and faithful. The elder *Thakur Sahib* went for an early morning dip in the Ganges and came back at midday after making the round of several temples, his body covered with sandal-wood paste. The younger *Thakur Sahib* had a hot-water bath at home and in spite of being afflicted with gout, wrote 'Ram-Ram'. When the sun had risen, he went to the park and fed flour to ants. As soon as it was evening, both brothers retreated to the temple in their house and listened to the *Bhagavad* with rapt attention. Vikram's elder brother Prakash had more faith in *sadhus* and *mahatmas*. He raked the dust of monasteries and the huts and abodes of *sadhus*. And *Mataji* did nothing from morn to mid-night save bathe and fast and worship. Even at that age she was fond of dressing up but those days she had become terribly austere.

Why do people condemn greed? In my opinion, our devotion and attachment to religion are due entirely to greed. Our religion rests on our self-interest. It was an entirely new experience for me to see how greed could shape the minds and hearts of men. Even the two of us went round asking questions of pundits and astrologers and making ourselves unhappy in the process.

As the day of the draw approached, our peace of mind left us. Our thoughts were fixed on the draw. For no reason I began to harbour a suspicion that Vikram may refuse to give me the money. What would I do then? He could deny outright that I had ever taken a ticket jointly with him. There was nothing in writing, and no other proof either. Everything depended on Vikram's intentions. If he felt even the slightest temptation, I was done for. I couldn't complain to anyone, I couldn't even open my mouth.

Even if I said something now, it would be of no use. If his intentions were evil, he would refuse right away. If not, he would be hurt to the core by my suspicions. He was not that kind of a person but it is difficult to remain honest after one has become rich. The money had not yet been received; what did one lose by being honest at this stage? The test would come when he had ten lakhs in hand. I examined my conscience: If the ticket were in my name and I got ten lakhs, would I quietly make over half the sum to Vikram? Who can say? But the likelihood is that I would hum and haw and say, "You loaned me five rupees. Take ten in return, or even a hundred." What else would I do? But no, I could not be guilty of such a breach of trust.

The following day we were scanning the paper when, suddenly, Vikram said, "If our ticket comes out in the draw, I shall be very sorry that I took it jointly with you."

He smiled, but this was a glimpse of his soul which he wished to conceal under a show of wit.

Startled, I said, "Really? But in the same way I can also be sorry."

"But the ticket is in my name."

"So what?"

"Very well, suppose I deny that you have a share in it?"

My blood ran cold. I was stupefied. "I did not think you had such evil intentions."

"But it is quite possible. Five lakhs! Just think! The brain reels!"

"Then it is better to put everything in writing. Why live in doubt?"

Vikram said with a laugh, "You are very suspicious. I was only testing you. How is it possible? Why five lakhs, even if it were five crores, God willing, I shall not turn dishonest."

But I found no consolation in this reassurance. Doubt had taken root within me.

I said, "I know you will never succumb to temptation, but where's the harm in putting things in writing?"

"It is useless."

"Let it be useless."

"It will have to be written on stamped paper. The court fees for ten lakhs alone will be seven and a half thousand. What are you dreaming of?"

I thought. 'Never mind if I can't start legal proceedings on the basis of a plain piece of paper. At least I shall have an opportunity to shame and humiliate him and prove before everyone that he is dishonest. If it were not for the fear of earning a bad name, there's no knowing what a man would do. Fear of disgrace is no less powerful than fear of the law.'

Vikram said casually, "Why should we waste time writing a paper that has no legal importance?"

I was convinced that Vikram no longer meant well or else what objection could there be in the way of writing a plain piece of paper? I said crossly, "Your intentions are already evil."

He replied brazenly, "Are you trying to prove that in such circumstances, *your* intentions would not have undergone a change?"

"My will is not so weak."

"Oh, go on! I've seen many like you!"

"You will have to put it in black and white just now. I don't trust you any longer."

"If you don't trust me, I won't write it either."

"Are you planning to grab my money?"

"Whose money? What money?"

"I'm telling you Vikram, that'll be the end of our friendship. In fact the outcome may be even more serious than that." A sudden urge to violence blazed through me.

All at once my attention was diverted by the sound of a quarrel from the drawing-room. Both the *Thakurs* used to sit there. Between them there existed a friendship that may be found between ideal brothers. That is how it must have been between Ram and Lakshman. I had never even heard them argue, let alone quarrel with one another. What the elder *Thakur* said was law for the younger *Thakur* and the elder *Thakur* never said a thing without taking the other's wishes into account. Both of us were surprised and went and stood at the drawing-room door. The two brothers had risen from their chairs and moved forward a step, fists clenched, eyes ablaze, faces scowling and distorted. A fight seemed imminent.

The younger *Thakur* saw us and stepped back saying, "In a joint family, everyone has an equal share in anything that comes from anywhere, in anybody's name."

The elder *Thakur* saw Vikram and took another step forward,

"Never. If I commit a crime I shall be caught, not the joint family. I shall be punished, not the joint family. This is an individual matter."

"It will be settled in a court of law."

"Go to court with pleasure. If either my wife, my son or I happen to win the lottery, you shall in no way be connected with it, just as my wife, my son or I shall in no way be connected with it if you happen to win it."

"Had I known your intentions, I would also have bought tickets in the names of my wife and children."

"That was your mistake."

"Just because I had faith in you. You are my brother."

"This is a gamble and you should have realised it then. Losses and gains in gambling can have no bearing on the family. If one of these days you lose five or ten thousand at the races, your family will not be responsible."

"But if you deprive your brother of his rights, you cannot be happy."

"You are neither Brahma, nor God nor a *mahatma*."

When Vikram's mother heard that the two brothers were all set for a fight, she came running and began to pacify them.

The younger *Thakur* said angrily, "Why are you trying to make me see reason? Why don't you talk to him instead? He has four tickets. And what have I? Only one. How can I rely on that? It is a matter of great shame and regret that a man whose chances of winning are four times my own, should turn dishonest."

The *Thakurain* consoled her brother-in-law with the words, "All right, half of my money will be yours. Are you happy now?"

The elder *Thakur* turned on his wife, "Why should he take half? I shall not give him a copper. Even if we act loyal and large-hearted, he shall not get more than a fifth share. On what basis—intellectual, religious or moral—can he lay claim to half?"

Embarrassed, the younger *Thakur* said, "You know more about law than anyone else in the world, isn't it?"

"Indeed, that is so. Haven't I been a practising lawyer for thirty years?"

"All that will be forgotten when I bring a barrister from Calcutta before you."

"I care two hoots for the barrister, whether he is from Calcutta or from London."



"I shall take half, just as I have a half share in the family property."

In the meantime Vikram's elder brother appeared limping, head and arm bandaged, clothes bespattered with fresh blood. But he was beaming as he came and fell into an easy chair. The elder *Thakur* exclaimed in dismay, "What a state you are in! How did you get hurt? You didn't have a fight with anyone, did you?"

Prakash lay back in the chair and groaned. Then he smiled and said, "It's nothing. I'm only slightly hurt."

"How can you say you are not hurt? Your head and hand are all swollen. Your clothes are soaked in blood. What is at the back of all this? You were not involved in a car accident, were you?"

"It's a very minor injury, sir. I shall recover in a few days. There's no cause for alarm."

Prakash's face bore a peaceful smile, full of anticipation. There was no trace of anger, shame or revenge.

The elder *Thakur* asked with even greater concern, "But why don't you tell us what happened? If you have had a fight I can lodge a report at the police station."

Prakash replied with a light heart. "I haven't had a fight with anyone at all. The truth is that I had gone to Jhakkar Baba. You are aware of the fact that he shuns the sight of human beings and runs after them to throw stones at them. He who is scared and runs away is finished. But he who still follows Baba, even after sustaining injuries inflicted by stones, is made. This is how Baba tests people. When I went there today, some fifty people were already gathered, some bearing sweets, some bolts of cloth and others valuable offerings. Jhakkar Baba was seated in meditation. When suddenly he opened his eyes and saw this gathering of people, he picked up a few stones and rushed after them. There was a stampede. People ran stumbling. They simply vanished. Not one was left. Only I stood rooted to the ground like a clock-tower. And he hurled a stone at me. The first one got me on the head. Baba never misses. My head reeled, blood began to pour but I did not budge. Then he hurled a second stone which got me on the hand. I fell to the ground in a faint. When I came round, the place was deserted. Even Babaji had gone. From time to time he becomes invisible.

"Whom could I call upon for help? Whom could I request to fetch me some transport? My head was bursting with pain and my hand was still bleeding. Somehow I got up and went straight

to the doctor. He said a bone had been broken and bandaged it. He has asked me to foment it with hot water. He'll come again in the evening. But never mind the injury. The lottery is as good as won in my name. That is certain. One who is beaten by Jhakkar Baba always has his dreams come true. The first thing I do will be to get Baba a hut."

The face of the elder *Thakur Sahib* registered a gleam of satisfaction. The *Thakurain* began to fan Prakash. Even she was beaming. Sustaining those injuries in order to win ten lakhs was not a bad bargain.

The younger *Thakur* was getting very restless. As soon as the elder *Thakur* went for his meal and the *Thakurain* also left to arrange for food for Prakash, the younger *Thakur* asked Prakash, "Does he hit very hard? He couldn't, could he?"

Prakash gauged his intentions. He said, "He doesn't throw stones, but bombshells. He is like a giant in stature and strong enough to kill a lion at one blow. An ordinary person would collapse at the very first stone. Several have died but nobody has ever filed a suit against Jhakkar Baba. And he doesn't stop at two or three stones either. He goes on hitting till you drop down unconscious. But the secret is that the more you are hit, the nearer you get to your goal." Prakash painted such a gruesome picture that the younger *Thakur Sahib* was terrified. He could not summon up enough courage to face the stones.

#### 4

At last the fateful day dawned—the twentieth of July, the night of the massacre. When we got up in the morning we were dazed by the tussle between hope and fear. Both the *Thakurs* had had a dip in the Ganges while it was still dark and were now at their prayers. I also experienced an upsurge of devotion. I went to the temple and began silently to invoke my gods, "O refuge of the destitute, won't you look upon us with kindness? Don't you know how hard we struggled to buy the ticket? You are omniscient. Who in the world deserves your kindness more than we?"

Vikram came to the temple, fully dressed. He simply said, "I am going to the post office," and disappeared. A little later Prakash

emerged from the house, carrying a *thal* full of sweets. He went to the temple door and began to distribute sweets among the poor who had thronged to the spot. And both the *Thakurs* sat in contemplation at the feet of the Lord, heads bowed, eyes closed, deep in meditation.

The elder *Thakur* raised his head, looked at the *pujari* and asked, "God loves His devotees, isn't it so *Pujariji*?"

The *pujari* supported this statement. "Yes, *sirkar*, it was to protect His devotees that God rose from the ocean of milk and saved the *gaja* (elephant) from the jaws of the *graha* (crocodile)."

A little later the younger *Thakur Sahib* raised his head and asked the *pujari*, "Isn't God all-powerful and omniscient? He knows what goes on in the hearts of people, doesn't He?"

The *pujari* supported this statement, "Yes, *sirkar*, if He were not omniscient, how would He know the hearts of men? He saw the love in Shabari's heart, that is why He made her wish come true."

The *pooja* was over. The *aarti* followed. The two brothers sang the *aarti* in a loud voice and the elder *Thakur* made an offering of two rupees. The younger *Thakur* made an offering of four. The elder *Thakur* looked at him once, wrathfully, and averted his face.

Suddenly the elder *Thakur* asked the *pujari*, "What do you think is going to happen?"

The *pujari* said, "*Sirkar* is going to win."

The younger *Thakur* asked, "And what about me?"

The *pujari* answered with feeling, as before, "You will also win."

The elder *Thakur Sahib* emerged from the temple steeped in devotion, singing a *bhajan*.

A minute later the younger *Thakur Sahib* also came out of the temple, singing.

I came after them and offered to help Prakash in distributing the sweets. But he moved the *thal* away and said, "Don't bother. I shall manage. There isn't much left, anyway."

Feeling embarrassed, I set out in the direction of the post office when Vikram arrived on his bicycle, smiling broadly. At the sight of him everyone seemed to go mad. The two *Thakurs* were standing right in front. They pounced on him like falcons. There were still some sweets left in the *thal*. Prakash dashed the *thal* to the ground and ran. As for me, in my excitement I gathered up Vikram in my arms. But nobody asked him anything, they only raised cries of victory.

The elder *Thakur* looked up at the sky and said, "Say after me, 'Raja Ramchandra *Ki Jai*'!"

The younger *Thakur* leapt up in the air, "Say after me, 'Hanumanji *Ki Jai*'!"

Prakash clapped and shouted, "Praise be to Jhakkar Baba!"

Vikram laughed aloud, stood apart and said, "I shall take one lakh from the winner. Speak up, are you willing?"

The elder *Thakur* caught his hand, "First tell us."

"No, I won't tell you for nothing."

The younger *Thakur* was annoyed. "A lakh for telling us? Fine!"

Prakash also began to frown. "Don't we know the way to the post office?"

"Very well, get ready to hear your names."

Everyone stood at attention, perfectly motionless.

"Keep a grip on your senses."

Everyone was alerted.

"All right, now listen carefully. This city is nowhere in the picture. In fact, the whole of India is nowhere in the picture. An American negro has won the lottery."

The elder *Thakur* snapped, "It's a lie. An absolute lie!"

The younger *Thakur* said, "Never! Three months' penance gone to waste. Wonderful!"

Prakash thumped his chest, "I have had my head and arm broken in the cause. Is that a joke?"

In the meantime many other people passed that way with tearful faces. The poor souls were also coming from the post office bemoaning their fate. The American negro had bagged the prize.

Accursed fellow! Wretch! Devil!

How was it possible not to believe it then? The elder *Thakur* repaired to the temple in a rage and dismissed the *pujari*. "Is this why I have looked after you all these days? You thrive on ill-gotten gains and have a good time!"

The younger *Thakur* was broken, as it were. He beat his breast and sank to the floor. But Prakash's anger knew no bounds. He seized his stick and went off in search of Jhakkar Baba.

All that *Mataji* said was, "That everyone has been dishonest, I refuse to believe. What can our gods do about it, though? Snatch it away from someone?"

Nobody ate anything that night. I was also moping when Vikram



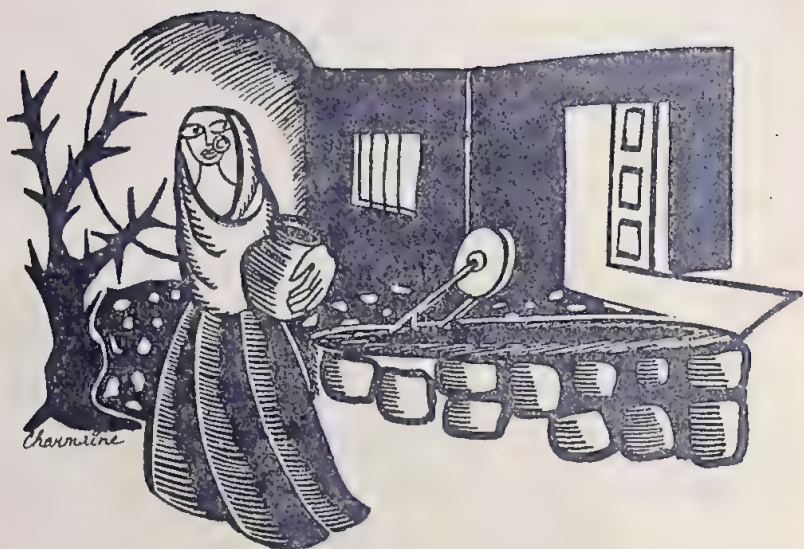
came and said, "Come let's go to a hotel and eat something. At home even the fire has not been lighted."

I asked, "Why were you so happy when you came back from the post office?"

He said, "When I saw thousands gathered in front of the post office, I was amused by our folly. If there were so many in one city, there must be a thousandfold in the whole country and more than a thousandfold again in the whole world. The mountain of hope that I had raised suddenly shrank to the size of a mustard seed and I laughed. It was like a generous man inviting a lakh of people to a meal on a handful of grain. And here each member of our family seems to think that . . ."

I began to laugh too. "Yes, that really is the truth. And both of us were ready to fight over reducing things to black and white. But tell me, were your intentions quite honourable?"

Vikram smiled, "What will you gain by asking me now? Let things not be dragged into the open."



## The Thakur's Well

(*Thakur Ka Kuan*)

AS Jokhu put the tumbler to his lips an awful stench arose from it. He turned to Gangi, "What sort of water is this? I can't drink it for the smell. My throat is parched and here you are giving me foul water to drink."

Gangi drew water from the well every evening. The well was far away. It was difficult for her to go there again and again. When she had fetched water the previous evening it had no smell whatsoever. How come it was smelling today? She raised the tumbler to her nose and sure enough it did smell foul. Some animal must have fallen into the well and died there. But where could she obtain fresh water now?

Who would let her approach the *Thakur's* well? She would be reprimanded from afar. There was the *Sahu's* well at the other end of the village, but no one would let her draw water from there

either. There was no third well in the village.

Jokhu had been ill for several days. For some time he controlled his thirst. In the end he said, "I can't stay without water any longer. Give it to me. I shall hold my nose and drink a little." But Gangi did not give him the water. She knew that his illness would be aggravated if he drank dirty water. What she did not know was that boiling would make it fit for drinking. She said, "How can you drink this water? Who knows what animal has died in the well? I shall get you fresh water from the well."

Jokhu looked at her in amazement, "Where will you get fresh water from?"

"Aren't there two wells? The *Thakur's* and the *Sahu's*? Won't they let me fill a vessel with water?"

"You will come back with your limbs broken that's what will happen. Sit down quietly. The Brahman will curse you, the *Thakur* will hit you with his stick and the *Sahu* will take five in return for one. Nobody understands the sufferings of the poor. Even when we die nobody looks in at the door, much less lend a helping hand. Will such people let you draw water from the well?" These words contained a bitter truth. Gangi could not say anything in reply but she did not let him drink the dirty water.

It was nine in the night. Worn out with the day's toil, labourers were asleep. But a few revellers had gathered at the *Thakur's* door. The days of hand-to-hand combat were over. These men were discussing prowess in legal battles: how, in a particular case, the *Thakur* had cleverly bribed the *thanedar* and got off scot free; how smartly he had procured a copy of an important case-file. The officials of the court had all told him he could not get a copy. One demanded fifty for the favour, another wanted a hundred. But here was a copy, obtained for nothing! One should know how to proceed in these matters.

Just then Gangi arrived to draw water from the well.

The well stood dimly illumined by the light of a small lamp. Gangi sat down on the parapet to await a suitable opportunity. The entire village drew water from the well, only these unfortunate ones were forbidden to do so.

With rebellion in her heart, Gangi began to attack false traditions. 'Why is it that they are high and we are low? Is it because they wear a thread across their chest? In this village each is worse than the other.

"They steal, they commit forgery and institute false cases. Only a few days ago, this very same *Thakur* stole a sheep belonging to a poor shepherd and killed and ate it. There is year-round gambling in the house of this very Pundiji. And isn't it this *Sahuji* who mixes oil in *ghee* and sells it as pure stuff? They make others work for them, but hate to pay the wages. In what way are they better than us? But of course they indulge in tall talk. We don't go about shouting in every lane, 'We are high-born.'"

She heard the sound of footsteps. Someone was coming to the well. Gangi's heart began to pound. If she was seen, it would be a calamity. Everyone would kick her. She picked up her rope and pitcher and walked back stealthily to the shade of a tree. "Do these people ever take pity on anyone? Poor Mehngoo was beaten so much that for months he was spitting blood. Only because he did not submit to forced labour. And then they consider themselves high-born!"

Two women had come to the well to fetch water. They were talking among themselves.

"They sit down to their meal and order us to get fresh water. They don't have the money for a pitcher."

"It seems men cannot bear to see us sitting. Yes, he couldn't so much as fetch a bucket of water himself. All he can do is issue orders, 'Go and bring me fresh water.' As if we are no better than slaves!"

"What are you, if not a slave? Don't you get food and clothing? You manage to grab a little money too. Slaves are no different."

"Don't torture me, *Didi*. I pine for a moment's rest, but in vain. If I had worked so hard for someone else, I would have lived in much greater comfort. And he would have been grateful too; while here I wear myself out working and nobody is pleased."

When the two had left after drawing water, Gangi left the shelter of the tree and came to the parapet of the well. The revellers had gone. The *Thakur* had closed his door and was going to sleep in the courtyard. Gangi sighed with momentary relief. At last the coast was clear. The prince who went to steal nectar in olden times could not have proceeded with as much caution and forethought. Softly Gangi climbed up the parapet. She had never before experienced such a sense of victory.

She placed the coil of rope round her pitcher and glanced right and left warily, like a soldier trying to make a breach in the enemy's



fort at the dead of night. If she was caught at that juncture, she did not stand the slightest chance of indulgence or forgiveness. In the end she gathered courage by invoking her gods and lowered the pitcher into the well.

The pitcher dived into the water, very softly. There was not the least noise. Gangi pulled swiftly at the rope. The pitcher rose to the mouth of the well. Even a tough wrestler could not have pulled it up faster.

Gangi was bending down to lift the pitcher on to the parapet when suddenly the *Thakur's* door was thrown open. Even the gaping jaws of a lion could not have been more terrifying.

The rope slipped from Gangi's hand. The pitcher crashed into the water and for several minutes soft gurgling sounds rose up from the well.

The *Thakur* approached the well with cries of "Who is there?" Leaping down the parapet, Gangi fled. When she reached home she saw Jokhu, with his mouth to the tumbler, drinking the dirty water.



## A Tale of Two Bullocks

*(Do Bailon Ki Katha)*

THE two bullocks belonging to Jhoori Kachhi were called Hira and Moti. Both came of the breed called Pachhai—tall and handsome and eager to work. Having lived together for a long time, they had developed fraternal feelings for one another. They would sit face to face or side by side and indulge in a silent exchange of thought. We cannot say how one understood what the other had in mind. They certainly possessed some faculty not to be found in man, although he claims to be the crown of creation. They expressed affection by licking or sniffing at one another. Sometimes they touched horns, not out of animosity but through sheer playfulness, just as close friends indulge in light-hearted scuffles. Without these, friendship remains hollow and insubstantial and one cannot depend upon it. When these two oxen were hitched to the plough or the cart, and swung their necks as they walked, each tried to take the maximum weight on himself. After a day's work, when they were unhitched, they refreshed themselves by licking each other. At feeding time, when oil-cakes and straw were piled into

the manger, they rose and ate together, and finished together too. If one turned away, so did the other.

As luck would have it, once Jhoori sent the bullocks to his in-laws' place. How could the bullocks know why they were being sent away? They assumed their master had sold them. Who knows whether they liked being sold in this manner or not, but Jhoori's brother-in-law had a tough time taking the bullocks to his place. If he drove them from behind they ran right and left. If he held the tether in front and pulled them, both strained backwards. If he hit them, they lowered their horns and snorted. Had God given them the gift of speech, they would have asked Jhoori, "Why are you getting rid of us? We have not, in any way, failed to serve you. If this much effort was not enough, you could have made us work harder. We were willing to die in your service. We never complained about our fodder either, but accepted whatever you gave us with bowed heads. Why, then, are you selling us to this tyrant?"

In the evening the bullocks reached the new place. They hadn't eaten all day but neither of them touched the food in the manger. Their hearts were heavy. They had been separated from what they had thought was home. This new home, new village and new men—all seemed alien to them.

Both held a consultation in their mute language, looked sideways at one another and lay down. When the village was asleep, they strained hard, broke their tethers and set off on their way home. The tethers were very strong. None could imagine that a bullock would be able to break them. But for a while the bullocks' strength had redoubled. One jerk, and the ropes were broken.

When Jhoori woke up early in the morning, he saw both the bullocks at the manger. Each had a short length of rope dangling from his neck. Their legs were covered with slush up to the knees and their eyes reflected a kind of mutinous affection.

Seeing his bullocks Jhoori was overwhelmed with love for them. He ran and embraced them. This display of affection was a truly charming scene.

Village boys gathered there and began to clap a welcome to the bullocks. This was not an unprecedented occurrence in the history of the village but it certainly was a momentous one. The assembly of children decided that the two heroes should be given a ceremonial welcome. For this purpose they got various things from

their homes—*rotis*, *gur*, bran and straw.

One of the children said, "Nobody has bullocks like these."

Another supported him, "They came back alone from such a distance."

A third said, "They are not bullocks, they must have been men in their previous birth." Nobody had the guts to refute this statement.

When Jhoori's wife saw the bullocks at her door, she flew into a rage.

"What faithless beasts, not to have worked there a single day! All they could do was run away."

Jhoori could not stand this allegation against his bullocks. "In what way are they faithless? Very likely they weren't given anything to eat. What could they do but run away?"

His wife retorted, "As if you are the only one who feeds his bullocks. Other people give them only water to drink."

Jhoori teased her, "If they had been fed, why should they have run away?"

The woman was irritated further, "They ran away because my people are not so stupid as to keep petting them, the way you do. They feed their bullocks and work them hard. These two shirk work so they ran away. I'll see how they get their oil-cake and bran. I'll give them nothing but dry straw. They can eat it or perish."

And that is just what happened. The worker who tended the bullocks was given strict instructions to give them nothing but straw.

The bullocks started to eat but the fodder was tasteless, without a trace of fat or flavour. How could they eat? They began to look hopefully at the door.

Jhoori said to the worker, "Why don't you give them a little oil-cake?"

"The lady will kill me."

"Give it on the quiet."

"No fear! Later on you will also support her."

Next day Jhoori's brother-in-law came again and took away the bullocks. This time he hitched them to a cart.



Moti made a few attempts to throw the cart into a ditch by the side of the road, but Hira steadied it. He was more tolerant.

On reaching home in the evening he tied both with stout ropes and beat them for the trick they had played the previous day. Then he gave them dry straw as before. To his own bullocks he gave everything, including oil-cake and bran.

The two bullocks had never been so insulted before. Jhoori always treated them very gently. At his call they would begin to run. Here they were beaten. They were already suffering the pain of wounded pride, and on top of that they were given dry straw to eat. They did not even look at the manger.

Next day Gaya hitched the bullocks to the plough but it seemed as though these two had sworn not to lift their feet. Gaya wore himself out beating them but they did not move. Once when that tyrant gave Hira several blows on the nose with a stick, Moti's temper got out of control. He ran with the plough. Plough and ropes, yoke and harness, were all broken to pieces. If the bullocks did not have long, thick ropes around their necks, it would have been impossible to catch them.

Hira said in mute language, "It is futile to try to run away."

Moti replied, "He almost killed you."

"This time we shall be beaten hard."

"So what? We took birth as bullocks, how long can we avoid a beating?"

"Gaya is coming at a run, accompanied by two other men. Both have sticks in their hands."

Moti said, "If you allow me, I can teach them a lesson."

Hira reasoned with him. "No, better keep standing."

"If he hits me, I shall also knock down one of them."

"No. This is against the principles of our kind."

In his heart Moti rebelled, but he could not do anything. Gaya caught the two and took them away. Fortunately he did not hit them at the time, or else Moti would have retaliated. Sensing his anger, Gaya and his helpers thought it wiser not to push matters.

Once again dry straw was laid before them. Both of them stood still. The members of the household sat down to their meal. Just then a little girl came out with two *rotis* in her hand. She gave the bullocks a *roti* each and went away. That one *roti* could not possibly have satisfied their hunger but it gave them food for the spirit. They were happy to know that even in that house there

lived a noble person. The girl was the daughter of Bhairon. Her mother was dead. Her step-mother was always hitting her; that is why she had developed a kind of kinship with the bullocks.

They were made to work all day and were beaten with sticks and they resisted. In the evening they were tethered to the stall and the same little girl gave them two *rotis* to eat. Such was the grace of this offering of love that the two bullocks did not lose their strength although they ate nothing save a few mouthfuls of straw. But they were seething with revolt. It showed in their eyes and in every pore of their bodies.

One day Moti said soundlessly, "I can't stand it any more, Hira."

"What do you wish to do?"

"Shall I toss one of them with my horns?"

"But do you know that the dear girl who gives us *rotis* to eat is the daughter of the master of this house? Won't the poor thing be orphaned?"

"Why shouldn't I toss the mistress instead? She's the one who hits the girl."

"But you forget that we are forbidden to attack a woman."

"You don't allow me any means of escape. Tell me, shall we break our ropes and run away home?"

"Yes, I'm willing to do that. But how shall we break such a stout rope?"

"I have a plan. Just chew the rope a bit. Then it will break at a single jerk."

At night when the girl had gone back after giving them the *rotis*, they fell to chewing their ropes. But the rope was so thick they couldn't get a grip on it. They strained again and again and failed.

Suddenly the door of the house opened and the same girl came out. The two bullocks bowed their heads and began to lick her hands. Their tails stood erect with ecstasy. She stroked their foreheads and said, "I shall untie you. Run away quietly or these people will kill you. Today they are planning to put a ring through your nose."

She untied the tethers but the bullocks stood still.

Moti asked in his language, "Why don't we go now?"

Hira said, "We can go, but tomorrow this poor orphan will get into trouble. Everyone will suspect her."

Suddenly the girl screamed, "Uncle's two bullocks are running away. *Dada!* O *Dada!* Both the bullocks are running away."

Gaya rushed out in a flurry and ran to catch the bullocks. They raced ahead and Gaya raced after them. They ran faster and Gaya raised a hue and cry. Then he turned back to take some of the villagers with him. The two friends got a chance to escape and ran straight on, so much so that they did not see where they were going. This was not the old, familiar path that they had come by. They began to pass through unknown villages. At length they stood by the side of a field and began to think of a plan of action.

Hira said, "It seems we have lost our way."

"Why did you break into such a run? We should have knocked the fellow down on the spot."

"If we had knocked him down, what would people have said? If he gives up his principles, why should we?"

Both were suffering from pangs of hunger. They began to feed on the crop of peas standing in the field. Every few minutes they would stop and listen for the sound of someone approaching.

When they were full, and had their first taste of freedom, they began to jump around in ecstasy. Locking their horns, they began to push one another. Moti pushed Hira back several paces, till he fell into a ditch. At this Hira was annoyed. He raised himself and challenged Moti once again. Seeing that a game was turning into a fight, Moti stepped aside.

Oh, what was that? A bull coming their way, snorting. Yes, yes, it was a bull. There he was, right in front. The two friends were cornered. The bull was like an elephant. To challenge him would mean certain death. But even if they did not challenge him, there was no hope of survival. What a fearful appearance the bull had!

Moti said soundlessly, "We are in a bad fix. How do we escape with our lives? Think of a way out."

Hira said in a worried tone, "He is drunk with pride. He won't listen to pleading."

"Why don't we run away?"

"That would be cowardice."

"Then you stay here to die. I am off."

"And if he gives chase?"

"Think of a way out then. Quick!"

"The only way is to pounce on him together. I shall attack from the front and you attack from the back. With this dual assault he will be routed. As soon as he rushes at me, drive your horns into his stomach. It is a grave risk, but there is no alternative."

The two friends leapt forward at the risk of their lives. The bull had no experience of fighting enemies who were organised. He was used to combat with a single adversary.

As soon as he pounced on Hira, Moti shoved him from behind. When he turned on Moti, Hira attacked him. The bull wished to knock them down one by one, but these two were very clever. They did not give him a chance. Once, in a towering rage, the bull advanced to put an end to Hira, but Moti rushed from the side and drove his horns into the bull's stomach. Furious, the bull turned around and Hira pierced him on the other side with his horns. At length, the poor bull was wounded and set off at a run. And the two friends went a long way in pursuit, till the bull fell down exhausted. Then they left him.

The two friends swaggered along, drunk with victory.

Moti said, "I felt like killing the fellow."

Hira replied with contempt, "One should not attack a fallen enemy."

"All that is sheer hypocrisy. An enemy should be beaten so hard that he cannot rise again."

"How are we to reach home now? Better think on that."

"Let us eat before we get down to thinking."

Right in front of them was a field of peas. Moti plunged into it. Hira kept telling him not to, but he paid no heed. He had eaten but a couple of mouthfuls when two men came with sticks and surrounded the two friends. Hira was on the boundary between two fields. He escaped, but Moti was in an irrigated field. His hoofs began to sink into the slush and he could not run. When Hira saw that his friend was in trouble, he turned back. If they were trapped, they must be trapped together. The watchmen caught him too.

Early next morning, both friends were locked up in the cattle pound.

This was the first occasion in their lives when a whole day went by and they did not get even a wisp of straw to eat. They could not understand what kind of master they had acquired. Gaya was at least better than this. In the pound there were several buffaloes, goats, horses and donkeys. But not one had any fodder before



him. They all lay on the ground, half-dead. Some were so weakened that they could not even stand up. All day long the friends kept staring at the gate but nobody came with fodder. Thereupon they fell to licking the saline clay of the walls. but how could that satisfy them?

When they did not get anything to eat at night, Hira's heart began to seethe with revolt. He said, "I can't stand it any longer, Moti."

Moti's head hung low. He replied, "I feel I'm going to die."

"Don't lose heart so soon. We must think of a means of escape."

"Come, let us break down this wall."

"I can't do anything now."

"Is this the strength of which you used to boast?"

"My pride is all gone."

The pound had *kutch*a walls. Hira was very strong. When he dug his pointed horns into the wall and used some force, a chunk of earth fell out. This encouraged him. He made rushes at the wall, hitting it each time, and with each attack, a little earth was knocked out.

Just then the *chowkidar* of the pound arrived on the scene, carrying a lantern. He had come to check on the animals. Seeing Hira's unruly behaviour, he gave him several blows with a stick and tied him up with a strong rope.

From his position on the floor, Moti said, "What did you get out of it except a beating?"

"At least I tried with all my might."

"What use is might if it only serves to bind you further?"

"I shall go on trying, no matter how tightly I am bound."

"You will lose your life."

"It doesn't matter. We have to die anyway. Just think, if the wall had been knocked down, how many lives would have been saved. So many of our brothers are imprisoned here. Not one has any strength left in his body. If things go on like this for a few more, days they will all die."

"Yes, you are right. If that is so, I shall also try my strength."

Moti dug his horns into the same spot on the wall. A bit of the mud fell and he was encouraged. Thereupon he began to lunge at the wall as if he were fighting an enemy. At last, after two hours, a portion of the wall along the top was knocked down. He hit again, harder than ever and this time half the wall fell down.

No sooner had it fallen than the animals, seemingly half-dead,

all came to life. First the three horses dashed away, then the goats. Even the buffaloes made off but the donkeys stood where they were.

Hira asked, "Why don't the two of you run away?"

One of the donkeys said, "Suppose we are caught?"

"How does it matter? This is your chance to escape."

"We are scared. We'll remain here."

Half the night was over. The two donkeys were still debating whether to run away or not and Moti was busy trying to break his friend's tether. When he was quite worn out Hira said, "Leave me here and go away. Perhaps we shall meet again somewhere."

Moti said with tears in his eyes, "Do you take me to be so selfish, Hira? We have lived together for so long. Today you are in trouble. Shall I desert you and run away?"

"You will get a severe beating. People will guess that all this is your doing."

Moti said with pride, "If I am beaten for the very offence that caused the noose to be put around your neck, why worry? At least the lives of nine or ten creatures have been saved. They will all bless us."

At this, using his horns, Moti drove the two donkeys out of the pound and then he went to sleep near his friend.

It is not necessary to describe the commotion among the Munshi the *chowkidar* and other workers the following morning. Suffice it to say that Moti was beaten hard and he too was tied with a stout rope.

## 5

For a whole week the two friends were imprisoned there. Nobody gave them even a shred of fodder. All they were offered was a drink of water once a day. That was their sole sustenance. They had been reduced to skin and bone and were too weak even to stand up on their feet.

One day a tom-tom began to play in front of the pound. By the afternoon some fifty or sixty people had gathered there. Then the two friends were taken out. People looked them over and walked away. Who would buy bullocks that were more dead than alive?

Suddenly a man with a beard and a very harsh countenance came up and digging a finger into the sides of the bullocks, began to talk

to Munshiji. One look at him and the two friends instinctively froze with fear. They had no doubt as to who the man was and why he was feeling them all over. They looked at each other with terror in their eyes and hung their heads.

Hira said, "Why did we run away from Gaya's house? Now we'll lose our lives."

Moti said irreverently, "They say God is kind to everyone. Why doesn't he take pity on us?"

"As far as God is concerned, whether we live or die it's one and the same thing. And where's the harm? We'll spend a few days with Him. But once God did come as our saviour in the shape of that girl. Won't He come again?"

"This man will use a knife. Wait and see."

"Why worry? Our flesh, hides, horns and bones—they will all be put to some use."

After being sold at the auction, the two friends went with the bearded man, trembling in every fibre. They could not even lift their feet off the ground but they stumbled along through sheer fright, because the moment they slowed down he hit them hard with a stick.

On the way they saw a herd of cattle grazing in a lush, green field. All of them seemed happy, well fed and full of spirit. Some jumped around, others sat contentedly chewing the cud. What a happy life they led! But how selfish they were! It did not matter to anyone that two of their brethren had been sold to a butcher and were plunged in grief.

Suddenly they felt that they had reached familiar ground. Yes, this was the path by which Gaya had taken them. They came across the same fields and gardens, the same villages. Their speed began to increase minute by minute. All their fatigue and feebleness simply disappeared. "Ah, here we are, this is our land, and this is the well where we used to draw water. Yes, this is the well."

Moti said, "Our home is close by."

Hira said, "This is by God's kindness."

"I am making a dash for home."

"Will he let you go?"

"I shall knock him down!"

"No, no. Run to the stall. We shall not proceed any further."

Wild with joy, frisking like calves, they ran homeward. "That is our stall." They reached it and stood there. The bearded man

came running after them.

Jhoori sat at his door, sunning himself. As soon as he saw the bullocks he ran and embraced them by turns. Tears streamed from the eyes of the two friends. One of them was licking Jhoori's hand.

The bearded man went and caught the bullocks by their ropes.

Jhoori said, "They are my bullocks."

"How is that possible? I have just bought them at an auction at the cattle pound."

"I think you have stolen them. They are mine. They will be sold only if I sell them. What right does anybody have to sell *my* bullocks?"

"I shall lodge a report at the police station."

"They are mine. This is proved by the fact that they are standing at my door."

Thoroughly irritated, the bearded man stepped forward to catch the bullocks and take them away by force, but just then Moti tossed his head and the man stepped back. Moti chased him and the man broke into a run. Moti ran after him, giving up only when the man had gone right out of the village. But even then he was waiting. The man stood at a distance, threatening, cursing, abusing and hurling stones and Moti blocked his way like a triumphant warrior. The villagers watched the show and laughed.

When the bearded man finally gave up and left, Moti came back strutting.

Hira said, "I was afraid you would hit out in a temper."

"If he had caught me, I would not have let him off alive."

"He won't come again."

"If he comes I shall deal with him. Let me see how he takes us away."

"If he has us shot?"

"I shall die but not prove of any use to him."

"Nobody places any value on our lives."

"That is because we are so simple."

In a short while the manger was filled with oil-cakes, straw and bran and the two friends began to eat. Jhoori was stroking them and scores of boys stood by watching. There was great excitement in the entire village.

Just then the lady of the house came and kissed the bullocks on the forehead.





## Glory for Nothing

(*Muft Ka Yash*)

AS chance would have it, those days our District Magistrate happened to be a man of taste. He had earned a reputation as an excavator of old coins. God alone knows how he found time for historical investigations in the midst of the dry-as-dust office routine. Ask any other officer and he is bound to say, "I am buried in work. There's not a minute to spare." (Perhaps hunting and excursions are included in their work.) I had observed this gentleman's accomplishments, and deep down in my heart I had a lot of regard for him. But his official position stood in the way of any intimacy developing between us. I was held back by the consideration that if I were the first to extend the hand of friendship, people would say that there was an ulterior motive behind it. And I cannot, under any circumstances, tolerate such an allegation.

I am even opposed to inviting officials to feasts and public functions. And if ever I come to know that an official has been asked to preside over a public function, or that a school, a dispensary or a widows' home has been named after a governor, I spend hours bemoaning the slavish mentality of my countrymen. But one day

the District Magistrate himself sent me a note saying, "I would like to meet you. Would you be so kind as to come to my house?" I found myself in a quandary. What could I say in reply? I consulted some of my friends and they said, "Write back plainly that you have no time. He may be the District Magistrate, but that has nothing to do with you. If it were some official or legal matter, it would have been obligatory. But it is below your dignity to go just to meet him on a personal level. After all, why didn't he come to your place instead? Would it have lowered him in any way? He didn't come because he is the District Magistrate. When will these Indian dignitaries learn that after office hours they too are ordinary people, just like us? Perhaps they try to boss over their womenfolk as well. They never seem to forget their status."

One particular friend who is a walking treasure-trove of jokes, related several very entertaining stories about Indian officials. One such official went to his in-laws' place, perhaps to bring back his wife. In keeping with the accepted practice, his father-in-law did not consider it proper to send the girl right away. He said, "Son, how can I let her go so soon? She has come after a long time. Let her stay for six months at least." His wife also sent him a message saying, "I do not wish to leave right away. After all, I have some ties with my parents too. It isn't as if I were sold to you." The son-in-law, being an official, was beside himself with rage. He promptly mounted his horse and made for headquarters. The very next day, his father-in-law was served with a summons. Thereupon the poor old man hastened to wait upon his son-in-law's pleasure, accompanied by his daughter. Only then, was he let off. These people have a false sense of pride. And what do you stand to gain from the District Magistrate, anyway? If you write a seditious story or essay, you will be arrested forthwith. The District Magistrate will not show you the slightest consideration. He will only say, "This is by order of the Government. What can I do?" You are not interested in securing the post of a *kanungo* or *tehsildar* for your son, either. Why should you go running to the District Magistrate for no reason at all?

But I did not care for this suggestion. It is boorish to decline an invitation from a gentleman only because he is the District Magistrate. No doubt, if he had come to my house, he would not have suffered a loss of dignity. A warm-hearted person would have walked in without ceremony. But then the post of an officer at the

district level is a big thing. And what is the standing of a novelist? In England and America, even the Prime Minister—let alone the District Magistrate—would consider it an honour to be invited by a story-writer or novelist. But this is India where poets of note flock to the courts of the rich to sing their praises and assemble uninvited at coronations to offer their services to kings, presenting eulogies and extending their hands to seek rewards. Who are you that the District Magistrate should come to your house? When you are so arrogant and pettish, what about him who is king of the district? Even if he is proud, it is justifiable. Call it what you will—his weakness or boorishness or folly or lack of culture, but it is still justifiable. It is a matter of pride to be a god, but it is no crime to be human either.

I would even say, thank God the District Magistrate did not come to your house or you would have been disgraced. Did you have the means to welcome him? There isn't even a decent chair around. Where would he sit—on a three-legged throne or on the dirty sheet that covers your floor? You derive satisfaction from your bundle of *bidis* that are twenty-four for three paise. Have you the means to buy cigars that are two for a rupee? You don't even know the brand-name of those cigars and where they can be bought. Praise your good fortune that the sahib did not come to your house but called you instead. You would have become the poorer by four or five rupees and been humiliated in the bargain. And if, through your great misfortune or by way of retribution for your sins, his wife had also come with him, there would have been no place left for you on this earth! Could you or your wife have offered hospitality to that lady? You would have been at your wits' end, completely dumbfounded. She would not have remained confined to your drawing-room, which you have decorated in a modest way. There your poverty is in evidence, for sure, but not your slovenliness. Inside the house at every step she would have found proof of your slovenliness. You can spend a lifetime in your own house, dressed in rags and wrapped up in your affliction, but no self-respecting man would like his distress to become a source of amusement for other people. In the presence of that lady you would have lost your power of speech.

Consequently, I accepted the invitation of the District Magistrate. Although there was in him a streak of unnecessary official grandioseness, his affection and generosity covered it up to a great

extent. At any rate, he gave me no cause for complaint. It was beyond his capacity to change his official temperament.

I did not attach any importance to this occasion. I had no reason to do so either. He called me; I went there, chatted a bit and came away. Where was the need to mention it to anyone? It was as if I had been to the market to buy vegetables.

But I don't know how some busybodies got wind of it. News went round in important circles that the District Magistrate and I were close friends and that he had a lot of respect for me. Exaggeration added to my prestige. It came to be said that he did not arrive at any decision or write a report without first consulting me.

Any sensible man would have made capital out of such a reputation. Driven by self-interest, a man goes mad. He clutches at a straw for support. It was not difficult to convince such people that their goals could be achieved through my good offices. But I look upon such things with contempt. Hundreds of people came to me with their tales. One had been treated unjustly by the police, another was troubled by the harshness of the income-taxwallahs. Yet another complained that he was being robbed of his rights in service. People junior to him were being promoted all the time. But when it came to his turn, nobody bothered. Cases of this nature came to me nearly every day. But I had only one reply—This has nothing to do with me.

One day as I sat in my room, a friend of my childhood days dropped in. We used to study at the same *maktab* about forty-five years ago. When I met him again I was not more than forty-nine years old. He would have been approximately the same age, but was much stronger and healthier than I. I had brains, he had only brawn. Maulvi Sahib had admitted defeat at this hands and had delegated to me the responsibility of teaching him. I considered it a matter of pride to teach a person twice my size and put my heart and soul into the job. Where Maulvi Sahib's cane had failed, my affection succeeded. Baldev began to show some progress. But in the meantime Maulvi Sahib passed away and the school was wound up. His students also dispersed. I had since seen Baldev only twice or thrice, on the road. (I still looked like a stick and he still had the same gigantic proportions). We had exchanged greetings, enquired about one another's welfare and had gone our separate ways.

I shook hands with him saying, "Come, Baldev. How are you?



What made you think of me? What are you doing these days?"

Baldev said in a pained voice, "I'm merely living out my days and no more. I have been wanting to meet you for a long time. Remember the days at the *maktab* when you used to teach me? Thanks to you, I picked up a little and can manage my estate, or else I would have remained a fool. I tell you honestly, you are my *guru*. Only you could have taught an ass like me. I don't know what it was, but after reading a lesson with Maulvi Sahib the moment I returned to my seat, everything would go clean out of my mind. But whatever *you* taught me, I remembered without making any effort to do so. Even at that time you were very intelligent."

Having said this he looked at me with pride.

I am always thrilled to see my childhood companions. I said with tears in my eyes, "Whenever I see you, I feel like running up to you and embracing you. It is as if this period of forty-five years had disappeared completely. The *maktab* seems to hover before my eyes and memories of our childhood days, with all their charm, become fresh again."

Baldev replied in a voice charged with emotion, "*Bhai*, I have always looked upon you as my patron deity. Whenever I see you, my heart fills with pride to think, 'There goes a companion of my childhood days, who will not fail me in my hour of need.' I feel very happy when I hear praises of you. But tell me, don't you get any food to eat? *Why* don't you eat? Why are you getting thinner all the time? If you can't obtain *ghee*, shall I send you a few tins? Now you are growing old so you must eat well. The strength and sparkle left in your body now are totally dependent on food. I still consume a *seer* of milk and a *pao* of *ghee* every day. Of late I have also started taking a little butter.

"All our lives we have slogged for our children. Now nobody even bothers to ask, 'How are you feeling?' If I were to fall ill today, nobody would offer me even a drink of water. For this reason I eat well and work the hardest of all. At home I am held in great awe. You know my eldest son? The police have started a false case against him. He is so intoxicated with his own youth that he thinks nothing of anybody. And he even looks like a wrestler. Once he had an argument with the *daroga* and since then the police have been on his tracks. Recently there was a dacoity in the village, and in the course of the investigations the *daroga* involved

him as well. For one week now, he has been in police custody. The case is coming up before Deputy Magistrate Mohammed Khalil, and Mohammed Khalil and the *daroga* are the closest of friends. He is sure to be convicted. Now you alone can save me. There is no other hope. The sentence apart, we shall suffer a terrible loss of face. Do just this much for me—go and tell the District Magistrate that this case is false and that he should investigate it himself. Look, you are my childhood friend, don't say 'no'. I know you don't get involved in such matters and people like you shouldn't either. You fight the common man's battles for him. It isn't proper for you to mix with the authorities, or else you will fall in the estimation of the public. But this is a personal matter. Let this much be understood: had this case not been absolutely false, I would never have come to you. The boy's mother is killing herself crying. His wife has stopped eating. It is a week since the *chulha* was lighted in my house. I drink a little milk but mother and daughter-in-law haven't eaten at all. If my son is convicted, they will both die.

"I have reassured them with the words that as long as my younger brother is alive, nobody can do us any harm. Your *Bhabi* has read one of your books. She considers you on a par with the gods and whenever the topic is raised, she cites your example and puts me to shame. I also tell her bluntly, 'Where can I get a brain like that fellow's?' To lessen her esteem for you I call you all sorts of names but I don't stand a chance."

I was greatly troubled. Baldev Singh had already countered all the objections that I could possibly have raised. To repeat them would be fruitless. I could think of no reply other than "I shall speak to the District Magistrate Sahib." But yes, I did add that I had no hope that he would pay much attention to what I said, because in such matters officers always supported their subordinates.

Baldev Singh said happily, "I am not worried about that. Whatever is destined is bound to happen. All I ask is that you put in a word."

"All right."

"Will you go tomorrow?"

"Definitely, I shall."

"You must suggest that he investigate the case himself."

"Yes, I shall certainly say that."

"Also tell him that Baldev Singh is your brother."

"Don't compel me to tell a lie."

"Aren't you my brother? I have always looked upon you as my brother."

"All right. I shall tell him that too."

Having seen Baldev Singh off, I finished my article, had a meal and lay down comfortably. Just to get rid of him I had made a false promise, but I had no intention of saying anything to the District Magistrate. I had forestalled all argument by saying that officers did not, as a rule, interfere in the affairs of the police. For this reason, even if the boy was convicted, I still had a chance to say that the Sahib did not listen to me.

Several days went by. I had completely forgotten this incident. All of a sudden, one day, Baldev Singh walked into my room accompanied by his wrestler son. The son touched my feet with his head and stood to one side respectfully. Baldev Singh said, "*Bhai*, he has been acquitted. Sahib called the *daroga* and gave him a good scolding saying, 'You harass and malign decent people. If you bring up such a false case again, you shall be dismissed.' *Darogaji* was mortified. I bowed and *salaamed* him. That humiliated him further. This is a miracle worked entirely by your recommendation. If you had not helped, we would have been ruined. You have saved the lives of four people. When I came to you, I was full of fear. People had told me, 'Going to him won't serve any purpose. He is very cold. He can't do anyone a favour. One who helps others is human. What sort of a man is he who has no time for anyone?' But I did not listen to them. Something told me that however cold and aloof you may be, you would certainly take pity on me."

With these words Baldev Singh motioned to his son. He went out and brought in a huge bundle, packed with a variety of rural delicacies. I kept on repeating, "Why did you bring all this stuff? There was no occasion for it. What rustics you are! After all, you hail from a village. I never did put in a word. I did not go to the Sahib at all." But nobody listened to me. I received a gift of *khoya*, curds, green peas, *amavat*, fresh *gur* and a lot else besides.

I did say after a fashion that I had never been to the Sahib, that things had happened on their own and that nobody was obliged to me. But this was taken as an expression of humility and a ruse

to return the gifts. I did not have the guts to assure them on this point and the interpretation they placed on my words was after my own heart. I did not wish to surrender the credit that I had not earned at all. In the end, when I insisted that they should not mention this incident to anyone lest I be mobbed by petitioners, it was like admitting that I *had* made a recommendation—and a spirited one at that!





## A Night of Festivity

(An extract from *Godan*)

IN our villages, for six months in the year, drums and cymbals are played to celebrate some festival or the other. A month before and after Holi *phaag* is sung. From the very beginning of *Asadh*\* the ballads of *A:lha* are recited and the rainy season is the time for singing *Kajali*. *Kajali* in turn is followed by a recital of the *Ramayana*. Nothing can interfere with these festivities, neither the threats of the moneylender nor the taunts of the contractor's agent. It does not matter if there is nothing to eat in the house, nor a shirt on the back, nor money in the pocket. Man's normal longing for happiness cannot be suppressed. One cannot live without laughter.

As a rule, the centre of all the festivities during Holi was the *chaupal* of Nokheram, the agent. That is where *bhang* was made and colours flew and people danced. These festivities used to cost the agent some five or ten rupees. Who else had the means to hold

\*The first month of the rainy season according to the Hindu calendar.

a function at his door?

But this time Gobar had drawn all the youth of the village to his door and Nokheram's *chaupal* was unoccupied. At Gobar's door they were grinding *bhāng*, rolling up *bidas* of *paan* and mixing colour. A mat had been rolled out and people were singing, but the *chaupal* was silent. *Bhāng* was there at the *chaupal* but who was to grind it? Drums and cymbals were there too, but who was to sing? Everyone was running to Gobar's door, where *bhāng* was mixed with the delights of rose-water, saffron and almonds. Yes, yes, Gobar himself had brought a *seer* of almonds. He had brought fermented tobacco, specially from Biswan. He had also added *keora* to the colour. He knew how to earn, and he also knew how to spend. If you hoard your wealth, how can others see it? It is spending that makes wealth spectacular. Gobar was not only serving *bhāng*. All the performers had been invited to a meal, and the village had no dearth of performers. There were singers, dancers and actors. Shobha herself copied to perfection the gait of a lame person. And when it came to copying speech—human or animal—he had no equal. Girdhari was unmatched as a mimic. Lawyer, *patwari*, *thanedar*, peon, *seth*—he could imitate them all. The poor fellow did not have the materials required to dress for the purpose. But this time Gobar had obtained everything for him, and his performance would be worth seeing.

The news went round and as soon as it was evening people began to gather to watch the show. Groups of spectators came from the villages nearby. By ten o'clock they were some three or four thousand strong. And when Gobar dressed as the *Thakur*, Jhinguri Singh took, the stage with his troupes, people could not even find space to stand. Girdhari displayed the same bald head, big moustaches and paunch! He was eating and his first wife was seated nearby, fanning him.

The *Thakur* looked lovingly at his wife and said, "You are still beautiful enough to turn any head." And flattered, his wife retorted, "That's why you have brought a new bride."

"I have brought her only to serve you. How can she compare with you?"

The second wife overheard this comment and walked off in a huff.

In the second scene the *Thakur* was stretched out in bed and his younger wife was sitting on the floor, face averted. After several futile attempts to turn her face towards him, the *Thakur* said,

"Why are you annoyed with me, my dearest?"

"You had better go to your dearest. I am only a slave brought here to serve others."

"You are my queen. And to look after you there is that old woman."

The first wife overheard him. She stormed into the room and hit him hard with a broom. The *Thakur* ran for his life. After this came the next piece of mimicry where the *Thakur* wrote out a deed for ten rupees and gave only five, deducting the rest by way of gift, writing fees, commission and interest.

The farmer came and fell at the feet of the *Thakur*, crying. After a lot of coaxing the *Thakur* agreed to give the money. When the deed was made out and five rupees were laid on the palm of the tenant, he said in perplexity, "These are only five, my lord."

"They aren't five, but ten. Count them when you reach home."

"No, my lord, they are five."

"One rupee is mine by way of gift, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lord."

"One by way of writing fees?"

"Yes, my lord."

"One for the paper?"

"Yes, my lord."

"One by way of commission?"

"Yes, my lord."

"One by way of interest?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And here's five in cash. Doesn't that make ten?"

"Yes, my lord. Please keep these five as well."

"Are you mad?"

"No, sir. One rupee is an offering for the younger *Thakurain*, another for the older *Thakurain*. One to buy *paan* for the younger *Thakurain*, another to buy *paan* for the older *Thakurain*. That leaves one and that is for your last rites."

In the same way, turn by turn, *Nokheram* and *Pateshwari* and *Datadin* were subjected to ridicule. It may be that the jibes were old and the mimicry lacked novelty, but *Girdhari's* style was so comical and the spectators were so simple-hearted that they laughed even when there was no cause for laughter. The mimicry went on all night as tormented souls derived happiness from a revenge that was only imaginary. When the last act gave over, crows were cawing.

## A Letter

Hans Karyalaya,  
Benares,  
1st December, 1935

My dear Benarsi Das Ji,

I had your card and thank you for it. How I wish I could attend Noguchi's lectures but can't help. How to leave the family is the problem. The boys are at Allahabad and when I go my better half must feel so lonely and helpless. If I take her with me, I must have a decent amount to spend. So it is better to be tied down to home, than feel the pinch of money. And to keep young is a question of temperament. There are youths older than myself, and elderly people younger than myself. But I hope, I am growing younger every day. I have no faith in the other world and so the idea of otherworldliness, which is the greatest killer of youth does not approach me. Of course there is a healthy youth and a mad youth. Healthy youth consists of a progressive and optimistic view of life, at the same time avoiding the pitfalls. Mad youth consists of rashness and exaggeration of one's own capacities and dreams. I have not ceased dreaming and am a bit rash as well. The exaggeration has happily gone. So even of madness I have the better part. I have come to realise that a contented family is a great blessing. And great minds, there are heaps of them. It requires a great deal of judgement to know real greatness from imitation. I cannot imagine a great man rolling in wealth. The moment I see a man rich, all his words of art and wisdom are lost upon me. He appears to me to have submitted to the present social order which is based on exploitation of the poor by the rich. Thus any great name not dissociated with mammon does not attract me. It is quite probable this frame of mind may be due to my own failure in life. With a handsome credit balance I might have been



just as others are. I could not have resisted the temptation. But I am glad nature and fortune have helped me and my lot is cast with the poor. It gives me spiritual relief.

You have passed Mughalsarai so many times without taking the trouble to break for a day. And you expect me to come all the way, making my wife angry. Peace within is my motto.

Yours sincerely,

(Dhanpat Rai)

*(Translated from the Hindi original by Premchand himself.)*

## The Purpose of Literature\*

(*Sahitya Ka Uddeshya*)

A WRITER or artist is by nature progressive. If it were not in his nature to be such, perhaps he would not be a writer at all. He is conscious of certain deficiencies both within himself and without. And his soul yearns to make good these deficiencies. He does not see either the individual or society in that free and happy state which he has envisaged for them in his imagination. For this reason, he frets over existing psychological and social conditions. He wishes to put an end to these unpleasant conditions so that the world becomes a better place in which to live and die. It is these feelings, this very agony that keeps his mind and heart in a constant state of activity. Racked with pain, he cannot bear to see a group of people go on suffering in the grip of social customs and traditions. Why not arrange things in such a way that these people are released from poverty and slavery? The more intensely he feels this pain, the more forceful and sincere do his writings become. The secret of his artistic skill is the perspective in which he puts down his experiences. But perhaps the need to stress this attribute of a writer arose only because progress or advancement does not mean the same thing to every writer. The very conditions that are regarded as progressive by one group, may be regarded as positively retrogressive by another. Therefore a writer does not wish to make his art subservient to one particular purpose. To his way of thinking, art is the name given to an expression of one's feelings, whatever effect these feelings may have on the individual or on society.

By progress we mean conditions that generate within us steadfastness and a will to work; which make us aware of the misery of

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\*An extract from Premchand's Presidential Address delivered at the first All India meet of the Progressive Writers' Association.

our existence. These are conditions which drive us to see for what reasons, internal and external, we have degenerated so much and to try to remove them.

Those poetic emotions which strengthen the conviction that the world is destructible and which fill our hearts with despondency are, for us, meaningless. Those love stories which crowd the pages of our magazines are meaningless too if they do not stimulate us. If we relate the love story of two young people but it does not in any way affect our love for beauty or, even if it does, it is only to the extent that we weep over their separation, how has it stimulated our minds or interests? At one time such things might have excited us but today they are of no use to us. The days of art that excited the emotions are over. Now we need art that carries the message of action. Now we have come to say with Hazrat Iqbal—"If you are searching for the secret of life, you shall not find it anywhere save in the heat of struggle. It is dishonourable for a river to merge and rest in the ocean. In pursuit of happiness I never stay in my nest. Sometimes I flit among branches in bloom. At other times I am on the river bank."

In our profession, egoism and the habit of considering one's personal point of view as supreme are things that lead to inertia and downfall. And such art is of no use to us, either individually or collectively.

I have no hesitation in saying that I weigh art, like other things, in the balance of usefulness. Without a doubt, the pursuit of literature strengthens our instinct for beauty and is the key to our spiritual bliss. But there is no aesthetic, intellectual or spiritual bliss which does not contain an element of usefulness. Pleasure is itself a potentially useful thing. And from the standpoint of usefulness, the same thing can give us both pleasure and pain. A rosy glow in the sky is no doubt a beautiful spectacle, but it cannot make us happy on a day in the rainy season. At that time we feel happy only at the sight of dark clouds spread over the sky.

Looking at flowers gives us joy because from them we hope to get fruit. Living in harmony with nature gives us happiness and leads to spiritual growth. The law of nature is growth and enrichment and the emotions, experiences and thoughts which give us happiness also help in our growth and enrichment. By creating beauty through his art, an artist creates circumstances conducive to such development.

But beauty, like some other things, is not self-contained or absolute. Its nature is also relative. What to a rich man is a source of pleasure may be to another a reason for sorrow. When a rich man, seated in his beautiful, scented garden, listens to the song of birds, he achieves heavenly bliss. But another, an enlightened person, considers all these objects of luxury contemptible in the extreme.

Equality and fraternity, culture and love have been the golden dreams of idealists since the beginning of human society. Religious founders have made a continuous but futile effort to make these dreams a reality through religious, moral and spiritual codes. Mahatma Buddha, Jesus Christ, Hazrat Mohammed and other prophets and religious leaders tried to raise the edifice of equality on a foundation of morality. But none of them succeeded and today the difference between high and low is sharper than ever before.

"It is foolish to put to the test again what has already been tried." In keeping with this aphorism, if we still try to reach the exalted goal of equality through religion and morality, we are doomed to failure. Shall we consider this dream the creation of an overexcited brain and forget it? In that case we shall have no ideal left for man's progress and fulfilment. It would be far better for man to be wiped out of existence. The ideal that we have nurtured since the dawn of civilization, for which man has made God knows how many sacrifices, for the fulfilment of which religions came into being, the history of which is the history of mankind—that ideal we must consider a sacred and indestructible truth and thus set foot on the road to progress. We have to bring to perfection a new society where equality has acquired a more tangible form, no longer dependent on moral laws. Our literature has to keep this ideal in view.

We shall have to change our standards of beauty. To date these standards have been dictated by wealth and luxury. Our artist has constantly sought to attach himself to the rich. His very existence has depended on their patronage and the purpose of art has been an elaboration of their joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, conflicts and rivalries. The artist lifted his eyes towards the elite living in palaces. Huts and ruins had no claim on his attention. These he considered to be outside the sphere of humanity. If ever he mentioned them, it was only to make fun of them. The rustic apparel, customs and manners of the villager were things to laugh at and his lack of polish or incorrect use of idiom were the



stock-in-trade of satire and irony. That he also was a human being, that he also had a heart and certain aspirations—this was something beyond the scope of the artistic imagination.

Art was and still is the name given to a narrow worship of form, selection of words and expression of feelings. For art there is no ideal, no noble purpose of existence. Devotion, detachment from worldly affairs, contemplation and renunciation—these are the heights to which the artist's imagination can soar.

To our artist's way of thinking, this is the ultimate goal of life. He has not yet acquired that broad vision which would enable him to see the glow of beauty in the struggle for existence. He does not acknowledge that it is possible for beauty to exist even in hunger and nakedness. For him beauty is a beautiful woman, not that poverty-stricken, plain-looking mother who sweats in the field, having put her child to sleep on the ground nearby. He has convinced himself that beauty lives in painted lips and cheeks and eyebrows. How can there be any evidence of beauty in those tangled locks, those dry, parched lips and withered cheeks?

But this is the fault of a narrow outlook. If his vision could become expansive, he would see that while painted cheeks and lips hide vanity and cruelty, those faded ones, wet with tears, speak of sacrifice, faith and fortitude. But of course there is no refinement about them, no show, no delicacy.

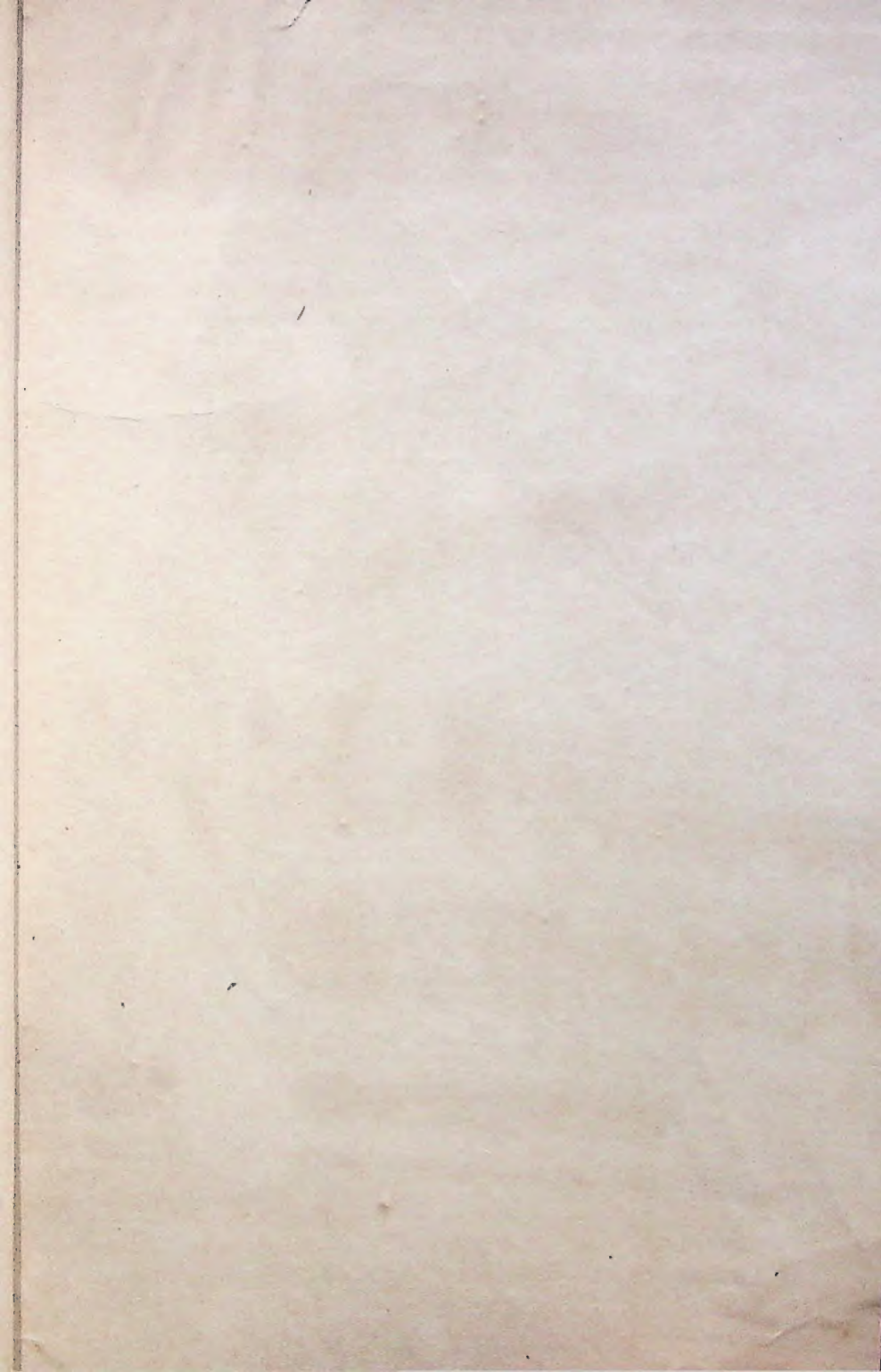
Our art is crazed with the love of youth. But it is unaware of the fact that youth does not consist of reading poetry with one hand on the heart, of lamenting the cruelty of the heroine or of fretting over her vanity and airs. Youth is the name of idealism and courage, the desire to grapple with odds and of self-denial. Youth will have to say with Iqbal—"Gabriel is not big enough game for my frenzied hands. O courage of Man, why not capture God himself?" Or again—"Like a wave, the boat of my life is oblivious of the current. Don't be led into thinking that I am searching for the shore."

And this situation will be created when our concept of beauty becomes pervasive, when it encompasses all creation. It will not then be limited to a particular class, its flights will not be confined to the four walls of a garden but it will have at its disposal the entire universe. Then we shall find ugliness intolerable and be determined to uproot it. When we can no longer tolerate a system under which thousands of men are the slaves of a tyrannical few, then we shall not be content, to create things on paper only. Instead, we shall

create a social order that is not inimical to beauty or good taste, self-respect or humanity.

A writer is not meant simply to embellish a *mehfil* or to provide entertainment. Do not degrade him to such an extent. Neither is he a follower of patriotism or politics. Instead, he is the embodiment of truth who acts as a torch-bearer and leads the way.







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